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AUTHOR O'Dea, Colleen
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ABSTRACT

This document reprints a series of articles appearing in the Parsippany, New Jersey, "Daily Record" on October 25-30, 1987 and November 9, 1987. The series stresses that the New Jersey special education system has vastly improved from what existed prior to the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, but that the system still falls short of its goals. The effectiveness of special education programs is analyzed, noting that education is not truly individualized, schools do not spend enough money or employ enough staff, some schools place students in inappropriate special education classes, many schools discourage parental participation, and the state does not monitor special education programs well enough. The articles provide statistical data on: special education enrollments by school district and by classification of handicap, types of special education programs by county, and costs of special education by school district. Numerous vignettes illustrate the efforts of classroom teachers to help disabled students learn and the efforts of parents to acquire appropriate services. A state plan is reviewed, calling for increasing mainstreaming, reducing inappropriate placements, modifying funding systems, and providing special training for teachers. Methods for evaluating special education are discussed. Programs enabling learning-disabled students to attend college are described. (JDD)

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Daily Record

Educating New Jersey's handicapped students

Not special enough?

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"To assure the free appropriate public education of all handicapped children"

Education of the Handicapped Act, Section 618, as amended by Public Law 98-199

EC 210786

Introduction

Almost a decade after federal laws guaranteed the handicapped a free and individualized education, are children getting what they're due?

No, not often.

But are they doing better than they did 10 or 20 years ago, when the handicapped were considered unteachable and shunned from classrooms?

Yes, remarkably so.

That was the finding of a Daily Record examination of the successes and shortcomings of special education. We had been contacted by parents who complained that their children were being cheated in special education. And we knew that the state Department of Education was about to release its proposal to change the state's special education system. The timing seemed right to give that system a report card.

Education writer Colleen O'Dea, working with Daily Record City Editor Jack Bowie, spent six months visiting classes and interviewing school officials, special education experts, parents and the students themselves.

She found a system in New Jersey that was vastly improved from what existed prior to the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, when it was estimated that fewer than half the nation's handicapped students were receiving the proper education.

But today's special education system still falls short of the goals we've set for it.

The education handicapped students receive is not truly individualized; schools do not spend enough money or employ enough staff to make it so.

Some schools place students in inappropriate or clearly wrong special education classes — merely because there's an open desk, or to get state aid, or because they genuinely believe students belong there. Some school districts are classifying too many students as handicapped. Others aren't giving the handicapped enough help.

Many schools discourage, rather than encourage, parental participation in special education programs.

The state does not monitor special education programs well enough to determine whether students are learning as much as they could be.

But the biggest problem is beyond the districts' control: Educators still do not know what causes learning disabilities or how to "cure" them.

The State Department of Education's "Plan to Revise Special Education," being tested in several school districts this year, will address some of these problems, but not all of them. The Daily Record published O'Dea's six-part report on the subject in October 1987. It hit home! Dozens of parents, school officials and readers called or wrote letters, wanting to tell their own stories. And it prompted us to do a follow-up story about the difficulties faced by many of the learning disabled when they reach college.

Colleen O'Dea, a graduate of St. Peter's College in Jersey City, worked as a reporter for The Record of Hackensack and as Statehouse reporter for United Press International before coming to the Daily Record in 1985.

Jack Bowie has been City Editor at the Daily Record since 1985. He formerly was a reporter, and later managing editor, for the Star-Democrat in Easton, Maryland. Bowie is a graduate of Washington & Lee University.

Here, again, is O'Dea's report.

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How effective is special ed?

1975 law's mandate not always met

A decade ago the nation's learning disabled and handicapped students won their right to an education.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 guaranteed them "a free, appropriate public education" that would be more specialized than the education received by regular students. It would be delivered "in the least restrictive environment" and follow an "individualized education program" that parents would help devise.

The federal legislation and the state laws that followed have unquestionably improved educational opportunities for most handicapped children. A decade ago as many as half of them spent their lives at home in front of a television or foundered at school, learning little.

Now most are in school, and many are learning more than their parents ever thought likely.

Still, dozens of parents, students, school officials and private learning disabilities specialists across New Jersey say school districts regularly disregard and abuse special education laws. As a result, many students are not getting the education to which they're entitled, and some may actually have been hurt.

Those familiar with special education say laws have been abused in several ways, including:

- Schools are classifying too many students handicapped and placing them in the wrong special education classes, sometimes in an effort to get more state dollars.
- School officials are taking too long to evaluate and place handicapped children in special classes, violating a 90-day deadline set by the state and postponing the children's special education.
- Schools are not giving some handicapped students the proper individualized education. Some are not following the education plans laid out for them.
- Parents are not being consulted about their children's educational needs and progress.
- The state and federal education departments are not monitoring special education programs carefully enough, and do not have any good way of gauging the quality of district programs. Not all abuses are being discovered or addressed.

Some of these problems were identified by a commission that studied New Jersey's special education system for two years. It issued its findings in 1985, and the state Department of Education studied them and introduced the "Plan to Revise Special Education in New Jersey" last January.

The new plan addresses many — but not all — of these problems. The new special education system it establishes will be tested in 13 pilot districts, including Bernardsville and Washington Township, in 1988-90, before education officials will recommend its implementation statewide.

SPECIAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS

The number and percentage of students classified as handicapped in 1986-87

County	Number of students classified	Percentage in special education	One year change in special ed enrollment	One year change in total enrollment
Morris	9,660	15.0%	−1.3%	−2.1%
Somerset	4,414	14.5%	−2.3%	−0.3%
Sussex	3,749	15.6%	−2.4%	−0.1%
New Jersey	**164,679***	**14.8%**	**−1.3%**	**−0.7%**

*Enrolled in 1985-86 Source: State Dept. of Education

Losses mount up

When handicapped students do not receive the concentrated, individual attention they need to learn well, they can become angry or give up.

Not only are they and their families hurt, but society suffers too.

Special education students drop out of school at alarming rates. According to the U.S. Department of Education, 21 percent of New Jersey's handicapped students aged 16 or older dropped out in 1984-85 compared to 5 percent of all the state's high school students.

Taxpayers make a considerable investment in each student. An extra $2,750 in state, federal and local taxes is spent on each handicapped child annually for special education and related services.

In 1982-83 almost $12 billion in state, federal and local tax dollars was spent nationally on special education. In New Jersey, $553 million was spent educating the handicapped.

Yet even when they graduate, special education students are not likely to get jobs, federal officials say. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights estimates that 50 to 70 percent of handicapped adults are jobless.

This is probably because some schools graduate students even though they lack the skills they need to work. In several court cases, including some in New Jersey, students have forced public schools to pay for private education because they were graduated with only elementary-level reading and writing abilities.

On the whole, state and local officials say New Jersey's system is a good one. But because special education is delivered individually to each child, and because handicapped students do not have to take the yearly basic skills tests that other students take, the success of the system is difficult to measure.

One gauge of the success of special education seems to be how many students leave the system each year — either by being declassified and returned to regular classes or by dropping out. These statistics are not encouraging.

In the 1985-86 school year, 106,736 New Jersey children were classified as handicapped and received special education, excluding 57,943 students eligible for speech correction classes. In comparison, only 2,184 children, or 1.3 percent of the state's handicapped students, were declassified.

Jeff Osowski, director of special education for the state Education Department, says this declassification rate is not a fair measure of the success of special education.

State and local school officials and many independent experts believe that most students benefit from special education, and they say New Jersey's system is better than most.

"In the main it's had a good effect on educational programs and enhancing living skills," said Joan Chase, a psychiatry professor who served on the commission that drafted the state's Beadleston Act.

Osowski lists several areas in which the state's system is strong. For instance, it includes programs aimed at reaching all handicapped children from birth to age 21, and features some model programs for the deaf and the autistic. And its programs teach "functional, meaningful curricula," such as reading, as opposed to "fad" lessons.

"On the other hand," Osowski acknowledged, "we have problems and opportunities we want to avail ourselves of."

One major problem identified by parents, state officials and learning disabilities experts is that schools misclassify students. This can irreparably harm their educational and emotional growth.

Some students who don't have true learning problems are nevertheless being called handicapped and put in special education classes because school districts have no other way of helping them.

At other times districts use the classifications of perceptually impaired and neurologically impaired interchangeably, even though the neurologically impaired are more severely handicapped, according to psychologists and learning consultants in private practice.

Being perceptually impaired means having a mild learning disability, such as dyslexia, when letters and words are seen reversed. Neurological impairments occur when a defect in the brain causes problems in hearing, vision or physical coordination.

When students who are mildly handicapped or not handicapped at all are placed in classes with students who function at a lower intellectual level, they can be hurt, psychiatrists and learning disabilities specialists say. The brighter students are held back, often feel frustrated and stupid, and can become emotionally disturbed.

No one knows how many students in New Jersey are being placed in special education classes when they shouldn't be. And no one knows how many are correctly identified as handicapped but then placed in the wrong class.

One indication that too many students are being classified as handicapped is that New

SPECIAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS

The number and percentage of students classified as handicapped

District	Number of students classified 1986-87	Percentage in special education	One year change in special ed enrollment	One year change in total enrollment
Morris County				
Boonton	229	14.5%	+6.5%	-2.6%
Boonton Twp.	61	22.8%	-1.6%	+3.4%
Butler	201	13.6%	-1.9%	-0.6%
Chatham	177	15.9%	-3.8%	-2.7%
Chatham Twp.	197	14.8%	-1.0%	-2.7%
Chester	112	15.7%	-2.6%	-3.7%
Denville	207	17.0%	+0.9%	-6.4%
Dover	507	21.7%	+20.4%	-2.9%
East Hanover	179	11.1%	+0.5%	-0.8%
Florham Park	128	16.8%	-4.4%	-4.6%
Hanover Park	151	9.0%	0.0%	-7.7%
Hanover Twp.	201	17.1%	+7.4%	+3.1%
Harding Twp.	35	18.4%	-5.4%	-1.0%
Jefferson	360	11.8%	0.0%	+0.3%
Kinnelon	308	21.8%	+11.1%	-4.0%
Lincoln Park	171	21.7%	-5.5%	-3.6%
Madison	204	11.2%	-2.8%	-3.8%
Mendham	118	25.4%	+19.1%	-2.3%
Mendham Twp.	57	13.7%	-3.3%	+2.9%
Mine Hill	55	23.7%	-12.6%	+8.9%
Montville	414	14.8%	+4.8%	-3.4%
Morris Hills	264	9.9%	+1.9%	-5.4%
Morris Plains	71	13.9%	0.0%	-2.8%
Morris District	665	15.4%	+1.8%	-0.4%
Mt. Arlington	80	20.2%	-2.4%	-6.3%
Mt. Olive	457	12.1%	+4.1%	+0.1%
Mtn. Lakes	160	14.5%	+10.3%	+0.2%
Netcong	44	15.7%	+10.0%	-1.7%
Parsippany	1,066	17.0%	+1.3%	-4.7%
Passaic Twp.	91	14.2%	-14.9%	-2.1%
Pequannock	374	18.3%	+9.0%	-6.4%
Randolph	435	11.4%	+7.6%	+2.4%
Riverdale	55	26.1%	-12.6%	+10.5%
Rockaway	150	28.5%	-11.2%	-1.1%
Rockaway Twp.	354	17.7%	-27.3%	-4.1%
Roxbury	686	15.4%	+9.9%	-1.4%
Washington Twp.	329	13.3%	-4.6%	+2.5%
W. Morris	197	8.1%	+8.8%	-2.6%
Wharton	110	20.5%	-13.3%	-3.9%
Somerset County				
Bedminster	565	23.6%	NA	+3.9%
Bernards	217	11.4%	-0.9%	+1.8%
Bernardsville	182	12.2%	NA	-2.6%
Watchung Hills	153	12.4%	-15.0%	-1.4%
Sussex County				
Andover Reg.	161	27.9%	+37.6%	+0.3%
Byram Twp.	129	13.0%	-0.7%	+3.0%
Fredon Twp.	59	27.4%	-10.6%	-5.2%
Green Twp.	69	19.4%	+7.8%	+0.5%
Hopatcong	513	18.4%	+13.4%	-1.7%
Kittatinny	89	7.9%	+20.2%	-3.5%
Lafayette	40	17.7%	-41.1%	+4.1%
Lenape Valley	101	11.4%	+26.2%	-1.0%
Newton	173	10.2%	+7.4%	+1.8%
Ogdensburg	82	21.3%	+18.8%	-4.0%
Sparta	317	11.1%	-4.8%	-1.7%
Stanhope	63	18.1%	-8.6%	-3.0%
Stillwater	90	19.7%	-25.0%	+9.6%
Sussex Vo-Tech	212	26.9%	+1.4%	-9.2%

Source: State Dept. of Ed.

Jersey's special education rolls have been increasing by about 2 percent a year since 1980. During the same time, general school enrollments have declined by about 1.5 percent a year.

The same trends can be seen in school districts in northwestern New Jersey.

One common problem for schools is how to classify students with relatively mild emotional and behavioral problems, psychiatrists and school officials say. They send them to out-of-district schools for the emotionally disturbed instead of labeling them "socially maladjusted," which might be more appropriate and keep them in regular schools, experts say.

Many officials say schools also have a monetary incentive to place students in special education programs for the emotionally disturbed.

This year New Jersey school districts will receive $3,110 for each emotionally disturbed child they educate. That's above and beyond the amount of state equalization aid given all school districts. They get little more than half that amount for each socially maladjusted student they educate and no extra money at all if they don't classify the students as handicapped.

School officials maintain they classify only those students with emotional problems that affect their education. But they acknowledge that the money makes it easier.

"The problem is, you have to classify kids in order to get any help," said Vincent Aniello, coordinator of the child study team in Parsippany.

Some districts also fail to educate parents about their rights or consult them when changing their children's individualized educational plans, which map out curriculums and goals. Leaving parents out of the system violates federal and state law.

Compounding this complexity are the high emotions that often accompany the discovery one's child is different. Many parents become so upset they simply take school officials at their word.

"You grieve for the loss of the perfect child," said Mary Gannon of Florham Park, whose daughter is neurologically impaired. "It takes a couple of years before you can go (to child study team meetings) and not cry."

Although federal law guarantees them an individualized education, special education students often don't receive all the services they need. In some cases, school officials say, this is because special education is so expensive — as much as $14,400 per child per year at the New Jersey Regional Day School in Morris Township. State aid generally covers less than half the costs.

The federal government, meanwhile, has never provided the money it promised for special education when it passed the law in 1975. It began by funding 5 percent of the cost of educating handicapped students and vowed to increase that amount to 40 percent — or an estimated $3 billion — by 1982. But that year the federal government contributed only $1 billion to special education, or 8.5 percent of the total spent on it.

Some school districts don't have enough staff — for example, Hamburg, Hardyston, Franklin and Wallkill Valley Regional in Sussex County must share a child study team.

Even the most severely handicapped students can usually get help, but rarely can they get it all in their home districts. For them, the "appropriate . . . least restrictive environment" often means spending 2½ hours a day on a bus. Osowski said the state has some model programs for hard-to-serve children, but the most specialized programs are few and far between.

In some cases parents shop around and move from one school district to another to get the best program for their children. In others they become so frustrated they keep their children at home.

New Jersey and other states are not policing school districts well enough to catch these problems.

The state's monitoring process is more of a paper work system than an examination of program quality, with county school officials spending less than a week in classrooms.

Violations of the law often go unchecked because parents either are unaware of their rights or won't complain because they fear reprisals on their children, according to attorneys and advocates who represent handicapped students and their parents in court.

Osowski defended the state's policing of districts, saying New Jersey looks intensely at each school district's special education programs every five years and reviews school district special education plans annually. He said state officials also investigate every complaint made by parents or other officials and order school districts to take corrective action.

But he also said the state often relies on parents to report abuses, and said officials are studying the monitoring process to determine how to make it "more sensitive" to finding problems.

Federal officials habitually find that states, including New Jersey, are not following many sections of the federal law. But the U.S. Department of Education has never used the only

weapon at its disposal to force compliance—revoking federal aid. Instead, federal officials give school districts more chances to correct the problems.

Three years ago a state committee headed by former Assemblyman Albert Burstein, a Hackensack attorney, pointed to some of these problems and recommended reforms.

One of the most important recommendations was that districts develop programs to help students overcome their specific learning problems, rather than put students in a classroom with other children who may have the same kind of handicap but not the same need.

The state Department of Education adopted many of the committee's recommendations and in 1988 will test its "Plan to Revise Special Education in New Jersey" for two years. Washington Township and Bernardsville are two of the 13 districts chosen to pilot the plan. The results will be gauged by the Princeton-based Educational Testing Service in 1990.

State officials say the new plan should eliminate the need for students with mild problems to be placed in special education classes, where many are stigmatized and feel stupid. Instead, these students would spend more time in regular classes with teachers modifying their teaching and testing methods. Those who need more help could find it in part-time remedial programs.

Although plans for a new funding system are sketchy, state officials say it will replace one that now encourages districts to classify students, sometimes needlessly. They say they also plan to demand more specialized training for teachers.

But they admit there are some problems the plan won't address.

It won't get programs started in rural areas for children with low-incidence handicaps, such as blindness.

It does nothing to increase parent involvement in the educational process or to educate parents about their rights.

There has been no proposal to strengthen the monitoring system or to determine through other means such as basic skills testing whether schools are doing a good job.

Some school officials say the plan will change little. Many question whether it will change things for the better or push more students with real learning problems through the cracks.

Most important, they say that removing the label "handicapped" from many students will not relieve them of the most devastating effect of being classified — the stigma. Even if they are not called handicapped, these students will still be put in special classes, and their classmates will still make fun of them, experts fear.

"When I was in school, the slow kids were in one class," said Dr. Harold Lubin, a West Orange psychiatrist and nationally recognized expert in special education. "We didn't know what it was called, but we called it the class for retards."

Achievement comes in small steps

All's quiet in Jeanne Pelcher's class at the Bernardsville elementary school as her eight students work on reading.

A blond girl sits sideways, violently erasing in a workbook. An index card taped to her desk reads, "Elizabeth can do it."

Marilu raises her hand. She's having a problem reading the word "nest."

"What sound do you say when you see an 'e' and an 's' together?" Pelcher asks.

"Net?" Marilu says shakily, then tries again: "N-est. Nest."

The word "nest" is any easy one to read for most children aged 7-10, but Pelcher teaches the neurologically impaired, and they need individual help in learning even the simplest words.

"Neurological impairment manifests itself in different ways in different kids," Pelcher said. "In some it's more physical. In some it's the way they learn. They need more hands-on work rather than a lesson being taught."

Pelcher's students work at their own levels as delineated in folders. Each night Pelcher checks the day's work in reading, math and other subjects, and assigns lessons for the next day. Much of her students' time is spent working individually, but Pelcher meets with them in groups of two or three to teach reading and math.

After the reading lesson, Wendy rises in front of the class to try a magic trick she's been practicing — using three cups to make cotton balls disappear. But every time she lifts the cups, the cotton falls out.

The class laughs and Wendy laughs with them.

"OK, it's time for math," says Pelcher, distributing quiz papers. Students will have varying amounts of time to complete them, depending on their abilities.

"Mrs. Pelcher, Mrs. Pelcher, I wanna skip math!" yell two students.

"No, you guys just got back from vacation," she says. "On your mark, get set, go!"

• • • •

Students at the Morris County Education Center in Mount Tabor have learning problems similar to those of the Bernardsville students, but the school's atmosphere is radically different. Most of its students also have emotional problems.

"Our approach is management first, then teach," said George Mako, who until recently was the school's principal. "We always group by behavioral chemistry first. If you're able to manage a group, then you can teach anything."

Nancy Melber Giambrone is teaching reading to a class of neurologically impaired students aged 9-13.

"The 'sh' makes a ssshhh sound, not a ch," she says to a girl sitting at a table with her. "Now read the next word."

"Chin, this, she, shade, shape," Tammy says slowly.

Grant raises his hand and calls in a mousey voice, "Miss Melber, I need help."

"OK," replies Melber. "Bring that over quickly."

When he returns to his desk, he shapes his paper into a boat.

"I can't do it," he whines.

"Now since you refuse to do it, you'll have to write the words three times each," Melber says.

The rest of her class, five more students, return from the art room.

"Was I good today, Miss Melber?" asks one boy.

"Yes, Kurt, you were," she tells him. "And yes, you may have a sticker."

"Do I have a good on my behavior?" asks Grant. "I was trying."

"You have to be a little better with the class rules," Melber tells him.

A poster listing the rules hangs over the blackboard. Among them: Listen to the teacher. Be quiet during work time. Raise your hand to ask a question.

• • • •

Bette Bass and an aide supervise four trainable mentally retarded students aged 10-12 in Washington Township's Old Farmers Road School. It's math time.

Robyn, 12, is putting ice cream sticks numbered 1-6 in pockets with the same numbers. Kelly, sitting with a teacher's aide at another table, puts colorful circles and stars into the centers of blocks with the same shapes cut into them.

Erik is working with the clock.

"Erik, can you show me what time we go home?" asks Bass, sitting next to him on a couch in the classroom's carpeted play area.

The boy moves the hands on the clock.

"And what time is that?"

"Two o'clock," he says.

Instruction of the mentally retarded is much different from that of regular students. The goal is to develop working skills the students can master by rote so they can live somewhat independently.

The classroom looks different too. It includes a sink and cabinets, several tables, a play area and toys.

"We try to find activities they'll be successful at," says Bass. "They know their names, counting to six, functional words, the alphabet. Every day we do a different letter."

When the children's work is done, they gather on the couch and look through two thick scrapbooks that chronicle the year in pictures — Halloween costumes, a visit to an apple farm, birthday parties.

This is Lisa's favorite activity. As she flips through the pages, she gets excited when she sees her teacher.

"There's Mrs. Bass!" she yells, waving at the photo. "Hi, Mrs. Bass!"

• • • •

The children for whom education will make the least difference are the most severely mentally retarded, classified as eligible for day training.

"Half our children have to be toileted or changed," said Duane Meyer, executive director of the Morris County Day Training Center in Morris Township. "We teach them as many independent living skills as we can. I've been here two years and haven't seen one student who can go out and live on his own."

The school enrolls about 40 students aged 3-21 from Morris, Sussex and Warren counties in a year-round program. They are assigned to classrooms — which include toilets, beds and special chairs — based on their ages.

In one classroom, two staff members fix Billy's wheelchair so his foot won't turn in. A normal 12-year-old until he was hit by a car, Billy sits unmoving, with one eye closed, the other scanning the room. He shows no sign of acknowledgement when spoken to.

Dawn sits in a chair designed to keep her head from flopping to one side or the other. She can nod and shake her head to indicate a yes or no. Joann Prekel, her teacher, tries to get her to move her hand across a board to show those ideas.

Smiling and encouraging, Prekel shows

Dawn pictures from "Dawn's family book."

"There's Dawn's dad," says the teacher. "Is your dad working today?"

Slowly, Dawn moves her arms, stretched rigidly in front of her, to the "No" and a grumpy face sign on the cardboard.

"Very good, Dawn!" Prekel says.

Prekel next helps Reed with work skills. She places a lollipop in a paper bag and has him fold the top over. He places an index card on top of the fold, then presses down on the stapler.

"Reed, you didn't fold the card!" Prekel says smiling. "You're going to get an extra special treat." She hands him some Rice Chex from a plastic bowl. Reed eats them, smiles and claps.

Prekel places a ladder on the ground for Reed's physical therapy and walks him through the rungs. When he starts to trip, she grabs him. She tells him to look down, and he begins to sit.

"No, Reed," she says, smiling. "Look down."

When he trips again, he pulls away from her hand and yells.

"No," she says sternly, waiting for him to calm down before they start again.

While Reed is in the bathroom, Prekel changes Billy. Both she and the aide must lift him from his chair and onto the bed. Prekel puts a screen up. When she's done, they move Billy back into his wheelchair. Then Prekel helps Reed in the bathroom.

The bell rings, signaling lunch.

Meyer says the job is incomprehensibly difficult.

"The level of reward a teacher of the handicapped sees is minuscule," he says. "The level of burnout is high. With the nature of the class teaching done here, coupled with the fact that we're 12 months rather than 10 months, our turnover usually runs 100 percent a year."

Teacher's aide Linda Solma helps special education students Erik Harper, Robyn Bridgman and Kelly Supples at the Old Farmers Road School in Long Valley.

Most parents have faith

The number of parents critical of their children's special education programs is relatively small. The majority say the programs work well and are helping their children overcome their handicaps.

S.S., a Parsippany mother who did not want to be named, says her son's school district detected his learning problem early, when he was in first grade. He had a difficult time learning to read but a very high IQ.

The boy was diagnosed as having difficulty translating what he sees and hears into information. The district's remedy: Give him remedial help for 30 minutes each day. S.S. says that's worked well.

"With the use of tape recorders and calculators, there's not a thing he can't do," she said. Her son is now in middle school.

Beverly Wright says the Lafayette Learning Center in Morristown helped her son overcome learning and emotional problems.

When he was in kindergarten, Lester Wright threw temper tantrums, his mother said.

"Some were so bad it took a couple of teachers to hold him down."

At first, teachers in the Morris School District worked on his learning problems. In fifth grade they put him in the Lafayette school for emotionally disturbed students.

"The best thing that could happen to him was to go into that," his mother said. "It worked well for him. He's 15 and looking forward to going to high school. There are still some problems, but not major ones. He's learned to control (his emotions)."

The parents of O.C. believe that the ECLC, a private special education school in Morristown, have given the teen a chance at an independent, productive life.

O.C.'s parents adopted him 4½ years ago when he was 12 and living in Colombia. They knew he had visual problems and seemed slow but "figured they could fix things when we got back to the U.S."

Upon returning to the United States, however, they learned his problems were worse than they thought.

The school district in Madison, where O.C. lives, determined he was multiply handicapped. He has a severe speech and language disorder and an impairment of the brain that hamper his ability to learn.

The school district has no program to deal with those handicaps, so it placed O.C., now 16½, in the private school.

"ECLC was our salvation," said O.C.'s mother. "We didn't really know what he needed . . . He's trying to become functionally literate. He seems to be increasing his knowledge of English.

These and other parents said it was difficult for them to accept their children's handicaps. They said it was even tough to put them in special education classes, especially when the children resisted.

Now they say that a name or a label like "handicapped" shouldn't stop parents from ensuring that their children get the best education possible.

"When he (Lester) was first told he had to go to Lafayette, he cried. He said it was a school for the retarded. Now he has no problems with it," Wright said.

"I don't see anything negative about working with the child study team. It got him the help he needed. If it helps the child, who cares if the child study team classified him?"

How special students land in wrong classes

Mistakes add to the challenge

When T.J. moved to Hasbrouck Heights in February 1986, school officials placed him in classes for the emotionally disturbed because he had attended similar classes in New York State. But T.J.'s parents fought the placement, saying their son had a brain impairment and should be in other classes to help him overcome that.

Similarly, the board of education in Washington Township in Gloucester County last year wanted to classify an 18-year-old youth, D.A., as socially maladjusted, a term for students exhibiting mild emotional problems. D.A. fought, too, saying he really needed help overcoming perceptual problems that slowed his learning.

Both disputes went before administrative law judges, and both judges ruled that the school districts had erred in declaring the boys handicapped. As a result, T.J. and D.A., identified only by their initials because of confidentiality laws, were placed in special education classes for children with learning — rather than emotional — disabilities.

In most cases, school districts classify students correctly, according to officials and court rulings. But education experts say districts sometimes make mistakes, as they did with T.J. and D.A.

Some of those mistakes result from the difficulty of the work; classifying a student as handicapped is more a matter of opinion than science. Federal and state laws leave broad interpretations of who can be placed in special education classes, and experts often disagree about who should be classified and as what.

Other mistakes can be attributed to sparse resources. For example:

- In some cases, students are placed in certain special education classes only because there is space available, not because it is the proper class.
- Students are sometimes placed in the wrong classification because a school district will get more money from the state by putting a student in that class instead of the proper one. For instance, a troublemaker who could be called socially maladjusted might be put in a class for the emotionally disturbed, a more severe classification, because his school district will receive twice as much money.
- Students who do not belong in special education are sometimes put in such classes anyway because they aren't learning in regular classes.

"Today there are some districts where every kid with a learning problem is called special ed," said Jeff Osowski, director of the state Department of Education's Division of Special Education.

Dr. Harold Lubin, a West Orange psychiatrist and national expert in the field of learning disabilities, said child study teams sometimes diagnose students "frivolously" and don't pay enough attention "to the strict diagnosis."

Misclassifying a student can be devastating. It can prevent him from working to his potential. It can leave lasting emotional scars, from classmates calling him names or from his own sense that he is stupid. It can lead him to hate school and drop out.

When the dyslexic spends a majority of the day in a class for students who are neurologically impaired, meaning they have brain or physiological problems and can't work as quickly, his learning is slowed. The dyslexic then can become frustrated, angry and depressed.

In the cases of T.J. and D.A., judges ruled the students were having trouble adjusting to school and were getting into fights not because they had emotional problems, but because they were having difficulty and that was upsetting them.

State officials agree there are problems with the way students are classified for special edu-

SPECIAL EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS IN NEW JERSEY

By classification of handicap

Classification	1977-78	1985-86	change
Percentage increase			
Eligible for speech correction services	52,841	57,943	+9.6%
Emotionally disturbed	11,015	13,955	+26.6%
Multiple handicaps	3,430[1]	4,675	+36.2%
Neurologically impaired	10,121	14,816	+46.3%
Perceptually impaired	27,722	56,649	+104.3%
Percentage decrease			
Auditory handicap	1,917	1,242	-35.2%
Chronically ill	1,853	747	-59.6%
Communication handicap	3,802	2,518	-33.7%
Educable mentally retarded	12,587	4,333	-65.5%
Orthopedic handicap	1,426	770	-46.0%
Socially maladjusted	1,648[2]	773	-53.0%
Trainable mentally retarded	3,691	2,577	-30.1%
Visual handicap	426	200	-53.0%
TOTAL	**127,401**	**164,679[3]**	**+29.2%**
Percentage of total enrollment	**9.0%**	**14.8%**	

1 - For 1979-80 2 - For 1978-79 3 - Includes preschool
Source: State Dept. of Education

cation, and they aren't limited to cases of emotional handicaps.

"Some students are geographically handicapped," said Barbara Gantwerk of the Division of Special Education.

For example, a student of average intelligence who lives in a district where most other students are working two levels above grade level sometimes is classified as perceptually impaired. If the same student moves to a district where students are working below average, however, he suddenly can be declared "cured" and placed in a gifted and talented program.

Osowski said that when he was the school psychologist of a small, rural K-8 district, a first-grade teacher referred the six lowest-scoring students to the child study team for evaluation every year. But those six children were not always handicapped.

In other districts, he said, "a pregnant teenager is called chronically ill and put in special ed," which he thinks unnecessary.

Numbers mounting

One indication that districts may be classifying too many students as handicapped is the rapid rise in special education rolls since the implementation of the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1977. The number of handicapped students has been rising even though total student enrollment has been declining.

Between 1977 and 1985, the number of students in special education classes in New Jersey rose by almost 30 percent to 164,769. During the same period, total school enrollment fell by about 20 percent.

The number of handicapped pupils in the United States increased during the same period by about 16 percent, or about half the rate in New Jersey, to 4.3 million.

One of every seven students in the state — nearly 15 percent of all students — is now classified by his school district as handicapped and is receiving special education. That is the third-highest percentage in the nation, exceeded only by Massachusetts, with 16.7 percent, and Delaware, with 16.1 percent.

"Why is there such a difference in the percentage of students classified from state to state?" asked state Board of Education member S. David Brandt. "There's a two-to-one margin from top to bottom."

Federal officials say part of the difference can be attributed to some states being more flexible than others in defining learning disabilities. But the numbers have grown in every state, and that can't be all bad, according to Osowski.

"Fifteen years ago, these students were not served," he said.

By far the greatest increases in New Jersey's special education enrollment have been in the two categories of learning disabilities — perceptually impaired and neurologically impaired. The number of students bearing these labels increased about 90 percent from 1977 to 1985.

It is in these categories that enrollments are rising so rapidly that most misclassifications are occurring, experts say.

Many say one reason for these increases is that the state's present funding system encourages districts to classify students in certain ways by allotting varying dollar amounts to the different classifications.

A state study commission, chaired by Albert Burstein, a Hackensack attorney and former Assembly Education Committee chairman, confirmed the funding problem in a 1984 report, "The Turning Point: New Directions for Special Education."

"It creates a need for districts to classify students by handicapping category in order to receive state aid," the commission wrote. "Many believe this encourages districts to overclassify students."

The panel found similar incentives spurred school districts to classify students in categories with the highest reimbursement rates.

Most local school officials deny classifications are driven by money, or they say it occurs only rarely.

"That's crazy," said Vickie Kelber, director of student personnel services in Washington Township, where approximately 13 percent of students receive special education. "State aid provides somewhat of a relief, but the thought of classifying a child for money, it's not worth it."

Money-driven categories

In New Jersey, the state reimburses school districts a certain amount per pupil based on the number of special education students the districts had the year before. In almost all cases this aid falls far short of what a district spends for special education.

School districts will receive $957 this year for each perceptually impaired student compared to $717 for a student in a non-special education remedial program. So there is an incentive for districts to classify as handicapped those students who may just be slow learners.

"If they're in a gray area, they wind up in special education because that's where they can get the services," said Osowski. "A good portion of those kids really are not handicapped."

Such money-driven classifications sometimes occur with troublemakers — students who cut classes, get into fights and talk back to teachers, according to many psychologists. They say school districts label such students emotionally disturbed rather than socially maladjusted, a less severe classification that might be more valid, so they can get more state aid.

Each emotionally disturbed child is worth $3,110 in state aid this year. A socially maladjusted child is worth just $1,675.

"The problem is there aren't any schools for kids who are socially maladjusted," said Dr. Marvin Chartoff, a Chester psychologist. "That category doesn't pay as well as emotionally disturbed."

Montville is the only school district in Morris, Somerset and Sussex counties offering classes for the socially maladjusted.

"We had a kid labeled (emotionally disturbed) when he saw his mother dying of cancer (and) another one who saw his father shot," said Jean Kelly, Morris County's former representative on the New Jersey State Parent Advisory Council for the Handicapped. "It's unjust to label them emotionally disturbed when they're just having an emotional reaction."

Local officials such as Vincent Aniello, coordinator of the Parsippany child study team, maintain there are sound reasons for students being labeled emotionally disturbed. He also notes that any student classified that way must first be evaluated by a psychiatrist.

At the same time, however, school districts seldom explore the option of alternative programs with flexible hours and employment for these students. The reason: Because they would get no state aid for them.

Troublemakers

Officials see other problems with the application of the emotionally disturbed classification. One is its use to send troublemakers out of conventional schools and into special, private schools, such as the Calais School in Whippany, the Lafayette Learning Center in Morristown and the Morris County Education Center in Mount Tabor, where discipline is stressed.

"We made a judgment we'd rather not have our own district (emotionally disturbed) program," said Neil Ellman, director of the child study team in the Hanover Park Regional District and its assistant superintendent. "We didn't want them in district in the first place."

Ellman said districts classify students emotionally disturbed only when necessary and have to base the classification on an opinion from an independent psychiatrist. But he acknowledged that sending a bad student to a private school is one way of getting him out of regular schools and said parents sometimes

are given a choice: classifying the student as emotionally disturbed or having him thrown out of school.

"We had a couple of situations in which a parent faced that dilemma," he said.

Robert Costa said he had no choice about sending his 17-year-old son, Robert Jr., to the Lafayette Learning Center for the emotionally disturbed in Morristown.

The boy has a learning disability, Costa said, and began acting up in special education classes in Parsippany when his parents were getting divorced. He said he was called by the principal at Parsippany Hills High School after Robert had showed up late to school 18 times.

"I said to them, 'You wait 18 times and then you tell me he's going to get thrown out of school if I don't send him to Lafayette?'" Costa said. "I don't say my kid is an angel, but they put him in with the ones who are illiterate."

Aniello denied that Costa was threatened and said school officials never use special education classifications that way. He said Parsippany deals with as many students as possible through counseling and other programs but must classify some students to get the state aid it needs to help them.

"That's a national problem," Aniello said. "If that's the way you have to do it to get the finances, that's what you'll do."

George Mako, until recently principal of the Morris County Education Center, acknowledged that some school districts use special education classifications to relieve themselves of students with behavior problems. He said many should be classified socially maladjusted, not emotionally disturbed.

Nevertheless, Mako defended the need for special schools, saying some kids "demand too much" and can't be handled in regular school settings.

"I don't know how they could get around," said Charlene Anderson, who teaches emotionally disturbed elementary students at Lafayette. "They'd be a detriment to themselves and others."

Lafayette "is a kind of place where your professional dignity had better be inside you," said Mary Marinucci, a social worker there. "You get spit on or cursed at or else you're wiping noses."

Interviews with three students at Lafayette showed each had suffered similar problems: getting involved with the "wrong crowd," cutting classes, talking back. All said they liked the structure and smaller class sizes at Lafayette but asked that they not be called emotionally disturbed.

"When I first came here, it really bothered me," said a Morristown teen who graduated last June after three years at the school. "I'm not emotionally disturbed. Don't tell me that. I'm a person who does not know how to feel inside. I don't know how to deal with some things."

School officials maintain that while the label sounds harsh, these students are indeed emotionally disturbed and cannot be accommodated in regular classes. But students still resent it.

"I really can't say I'm not emotionally disturbed because I am," said Lisa, another recent graduate from Lake Hiawatha who gave only her first name. "But it really does bother me."

Handicaps that lead to special ed

Before a child can be placed in a special education program in New Jersey, he must be evaluated by a child study team and assigned one of 15 classifications.

A student having learning problems can be referred to the team — a learning disabilities consultant, a social worker and a psychologist — by his parents or his teachers.

Then he takes a series of tests. The learning disabilities consultant, who is trained in spotting and treating learning problems, administers intelligence tests. The school psychologist gauges emotional capabilities. The social worker studies the child's background to determine if the learning problems have roots in the family.

In some cases — for example, when orthopedic or emotional problems are suspected — medical doctors or psychiatrists perform additional tests.

If the student displays characteristics of one of the 15 handicapping categories, the team will suggest that he be classified and placed into a special education program. It also can recommend steps short of special education programs, such as remedial help, tutoring, counseling or other measures to help him learn better.

When parents agree with the handicap classification, they work with the study team — and sometimes the student himself — to draft an individualized education plan. This serves as the student's lesson plan for the year.

The plan sets goals the student should reach in subject areas and in social and emotional

growth. It also outlines how teachers should instruct the child.

For example, the 28-page plan for M.E., a 12-year-old from Spotswood who has perceptual difficulties and dyslexia, lists one goal as to "increase his store of sight words until they become automatic." Some ways in which M.E.'s teachers are to accomplish this are to "provide him with a great deal of remedial repetition" and make him circle the correctly spelled version of a word from a list like mega, mgae, game, gaem."

At the end of each year, the teacher evaluates how well the student is doing. Every three years the team re-tests the student and re-evaluates his needs. If it and the family decide the student has overcome his handicap, he can be declassified. If not, they decide the most appropriate classroom placement and draw up a new plan.

These are the special education classifications used in New Jersey and their definitions as given by state education officials and independent learning disabilities specialists. The percentages reflect each group's proportion of the total number of handicapped students in the state in 1985-86. The dollar figure reflects the amount of state aid a school district receives for each pupil in the category:

AUDITORILY HANDICAPPED — An inability to hear within normal limits resulting from a physical impairment. Evaluations by a specialist in the field of audiology and a speech therapist are necessary. Approximately 0.7 percent of all handicapped students in New Jersey are in this category. School districts receive $6,460 from the state per auditorily handicapped pupil this year.

CHRONICALLY ILL — A health condition, such as tuberculosis, a heart ailment or leukemia, that makes it impractical for a student to study in regular classes. Often individualized instruction is given at home or in a hospital. A doctor's evaluation is required. 0.4 percent. $2,273.

COMMUNICATION HANDICAPPED — A severe speech or language disorder that interferes with one's ability to talk and is not caused by deafness. An evaluation by a speech correctionist is required. 1.5 percent. $2,751.

EDUCABLE MENTALLY RETARDED — Academic and social functioning that is moderately below age expectations. The student must score two to three standard deviations below the mean on an intelligence test. 2.6 percent. $1,714.

Howard Mitchell III, known as Booba, of Mendham, in class at the Morris County Day Training Center in Morris Twp.

ELIGIBLE FOR DAY TRAINING — A level of mental retardation so severe that the student is unable to understand simple communication and requires total personal care and supervision. 0.7 percent. $9,451.

ELIGIBLE FOR SPEECH CORRECTION — Someone with a mild or moderate problem in speaking, usually occurring in the early elementary grades. An evaluation by a speech correctionist is required. 35.1 percent. $319.

EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED — A serious behavior problem characterized by a long-term inability to build or maintain relationships, depression or irrational fears. The behavior problem adversely affects educational performance. An evaluation by a child psychiatrist is required. 8.4 percent. $3,110.

MULTIPLY HANDICAPPED — Having two or more handicaps, not including a mild speech problem, which make it difficult to learn. These children are often autistic or have a learning disability and also are emotionally disturbed. 2.8 percent. $4,107.

NEUROLOGICALLY IMPAIRED — A disorder in the brain or nervous system that hampers the ability to learn, often by impeding the flow of information from the brain to the hands or mouth. The student shows below-average learning potential on an intelligence test. This

category often includes students with cerebral palsy, severe dyslexia or attention deficit disorder, which is characterized by a student's inability to concentrate on work for more than a few minutes at a time. An evaluation by a doctor trained in neurology is required. 9 percent. $2,233.

PERCEPTUALLY IMPAIRED — A learning problem based in the brain or in physiology that affects the ability to listen, think, speak, read, write or compute. The student shows at least average potential on an intelligence test. These often include students with mild dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. 34.4 percent. $957.

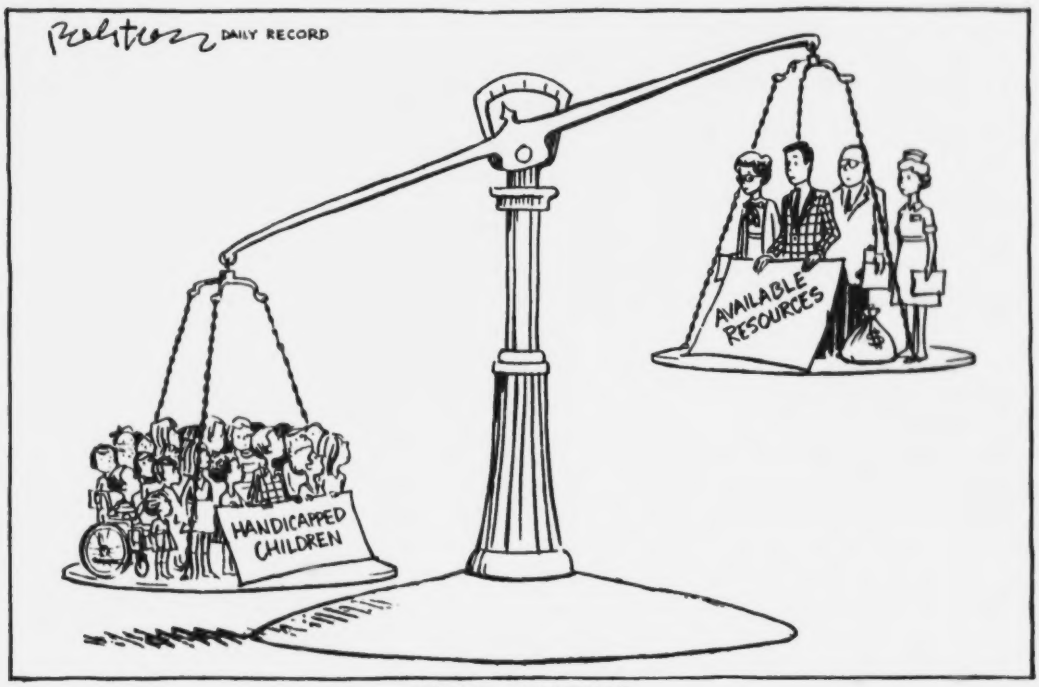
PRESCHOOL HANDICAPPED — Any handicap that is a physical, emotional or learning disability in a child aged 3-5 that probably will hurt his educational development. 2.1 percent. $837.

ORTHOPEDICALLY HANDICAPPED — A malformation or loss of bones, muscle or body tissue. An orthopedic evaluation by a physician is required. This can include a student with cerebral palsy or a bone fracture. 0.4 percent. $6,899.

SOCIALLY MALADJUSTED — An inability to follow school rules and acting in ways that are seriously disruptive to the student and his peers but are not the result of an emotional disturbance. A psychiatric evaluation can be obtained but is not required. 0.4 percent. $1,674.

TRAINABLE MENTALLY RETARDED — Academic and social functioning that is seriously below age expectations. The student needs direct supervision at home or in school and scores three standard deviations or more below the mean on an intelligence test. 1.5 percent. $3,110.

VISUALLY HANDICAPPED — An inability to see within normal limits, so that it is difficult to learn using eyesight. An evaluation by a specialist in visual disabilities is required. 0.1 percent. $5,064.



FOUND WANTING

Parents fight for their children's rights

Speaking up pays off

In 1981, the Parsippany school district attempted to move S.G., a multiply handicapped 12-year-old, from a private school in Pennsylvania, where he had studied for four years, to Parsippany's own special education program at Brooklawn Junior High School.

Parsippany, which paid the boy's tuition, argued that its own program would meet his needs and be much closer to his home. But his parents, Robert and Loretta Geis, claimed the Woods School, a residential special education school in Pennsylvania, was the best place for him, and they asked the courts to order him kept there.

The U.S. Court of Appeals, in a precedent-setting opinion in September 1985, agreed with them. It said Parsippany must continue to pay for S.G.'s education in Pennsylvania because state law entitled him to more than just an appropriate education.

Had the Geis family not fought in the courts for four years, their son would have been transferred to the Parsippany school, where he would have gotten an education that was good — but not the best, according to the appeals court.

When most parents send their children to school, they assume that the school is doing a good job of educating their children. Parents of special education students don't have that luxury.

They have to work with schools to plan their children's lessons. They fight over the kinds of classes they think most appropriate for their children. And sometimes they have to go to court to get the education their children are guaranteed.

When parents don't fight, their children often don't get the best education.

Sometimes their children don't even receive the basic services entitled them by federal and state special education laws. Parents cite two important ways in which school districts break the law:

- Child study teams sometimes fail to evaluate children, to devise students' individualized lesson plans and to place them in classes within the 90-day time limit required by law.
- School districts sometimes ignore students' individualized education plans, which prescribe their courses of study, or alter them without parental input.

In both cases students fail to get the best education available, and they fail to get it quickly. Their educational advancement can be stunted, and some can suffer emotionally.

K.D., who did not want her name used, said it took the child study team in Hamburg about six months to evaluate her daughter's learning problems last year. She said team members kept putting off testing the girl, who was in sixth grade, saying they were overworked.

At first K.D. understood, then she learned the law required the team to complete its work within 90 days.

"When I found that out, I was mad," she said. "I said, 'I want this child tested and I want it done quickly.' They still didn't do it."

Peter Pallis, director of the Franklin-based Regional Child Study Team, which evaluates students for Hamburg, said a state law ensuring the confidentiality of handicapped students prohibited him from commenting on individual cases. But he said the team acted properly in K.D.'s case.

"We finished the evaluation at a time that was appropriate to her needs," Pallis said. "We attempted to meet her needs throughout.

"When you ask if we break the law, we don't try to do that. We try to get back to them within that 90 days. If I'm going to go beyond the point, I tell the parents and we do something in between."

Involuntary transfer

Nicole Lubas was classified as perceptually impaired — meaning a problem in her brain affects her ability to learn — at the end of second grade. Soon after starting sixth grade, she came home devastated, saying, "'Oh, Mommy, they put me in with all the retarded kids,'" said her mother, Maureen Lubas of Wantage.

Lubas said the Sussex-Wantage Regional District's child study team had transferred her

daughter to a special vocational class, where she was taught fewer academic subjects than she had received in her prior special education class.

"They took every book away from her," Lubas said. "They took her math away." Nicole "was crocheting squares . . . She was regressing at such a rate I couldn't believe it."

Lubas said she had not been informed of the transfer, and she said it violated the girl's individual education plan. She fought the team and pleaded with the board of education for seven months before she finally got Nicole returned to a resource room, where she receives several hours of instruction each week in the subjects she finds most difficult.

Margaret A. Greydanus, coordinator of the Sussex-Wantage child study team, said she could not discuss the Lubas case. Speaking generally, she said that grouping students with different handicaps together — as the vocational class was set up — can be positive if the children need the same kind of help.

"Parents are not the best ones to judge a child's program," Greydanus said. "They are not professionals. We have problems with parents whose expectations are unrealistic. We don't believe in giving up on any children, but there are times when pushing them incessantly doesn't work.

"Some parents fault the school system for their children's failure to learn."

School officials also say that some parents who want the best for their children complain when a school district can't give that much.

"Many times the parents are critical of what exists," said Richard Lecher, executive director of the Sussex County Association for Retarded Citizens. "But it's a heck of a lot more than when I started 15 years ago."

Herb Hinkle, a Trenton lawyer for the learning disabled and former director of the Division of Advocacy for the Developmentally Disabled of the state Department of the Public Advocate, disagreed that parents are too critical.

"You can always find nit-pickers," he said. "But I think people are extremely patient, almost to the point of being too accepting."

And parents like Lubas say it's their right to push for what they think is best for their children.

"I've found the parents who are most satisfied with their children's special education programs were the parents who were involved," she said.

Partners in education

Dr. Betty Osman, an educational therapist who is active in the Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities, said the 1975 federal law guaranteeing handicapped students' rights was supposed to make parents "equal partners" in special education.

"In practice, that's not happening," Osman told members of the Florham Park Association for Learning Differences last summer. "Parents are not always fully informed or aware of their rights. They leave the education to us."

Local school officials maintain they follow state law, involving parents whenever necessary and providing them with exactly what is required: a copy of the New Jersey Administrative Code covering special education. By law, this must be given to parents whenever a child is referred to a study team for evaluation.

However, few school districts go further and explain these rights and rules to parents in plain English.

"About 90 percent of the problems occur because parents don't know their rights," said Joyce James, a child advocate from Mount Olive who has a 16½-year-old, neurologically impaired son. "We have friends who are college graduates who were handed the regulations and said it's too deep for them. People become intimidated."

For example, here is how the definition of the two categories of learning disabilities appears in state regulations:

"'Neurologically or perceptually impaired' means an impairment in the ability to process information due to physiological, organizational or integrational dysfunction which is not the result of any other educationally handicapping condition or environmental, cultural or economic hardships."

Although the New Jersey State Parent Advisory Council last year drafted a "parent-friendly handbook" that summarizes the law in plain language, many districts don't distribute it. School officials say districts are not required to distribute the handbook. One reason might be that they receive only a limited number of handbooks from the state and would have to pay to make additional copies.

But even the handbook is flawed: It does not explain all parts of the law. For instance, it does not tell parents that school districts have 90 days after a child is referred to a child study team to decide whether he should be placed in a special education program — and which one.

Lines of communication

Local and state school officials say parents have no excuses for not learning their rights, helping draft their children's educational plans and seeing they're followed. And they say it is difficult getting parents to attend meetings.

"The district . . . sends a letter to the parents saying what will be done in the evaluation, what the parent's rights are if he wishes to contest," said Jeff Osowski, director of special education for the state Department of Education.

"To parents who say to me, 'I don't understand what my rights are,' I say, 'You should read it and understand.' There's the public advocate, the child study team, parent training sessions. Learning resource centers have information. There's a pretty strong outreach."

Some districts try to get parents involved from the start. In Washington Township in Morris County, for instance, a child's teacher calls parents even before they receive official notification their child is being referred for testing.

"She tells them, 'You are going to get a lot of intimidating-looking papers,'" said Vickie Kelber, the school district's director of student personnel services. "We do this to try to make things less overwhelming for them."

The district also gives each family a thick "parent information packet" that contains not only the code and the state's easier-to-read handbook but other pamphlets as well. There are several articles about learning disabilities, a roster of the district's special education staff and a plea to join a parents' organization.

Some school districts do listen, as Lubas and another mother, Joanne Clint, found last year. They took their complaints about special education to the Sussex-Wantage Regional school board, and they got some publicity by calling local newspapers. As a result, they said, the child study team has adopted many of their suggestions about starting new programs.

For example, the district this year is providing in-house graduate teacher training and a new reading program and is using a new intelligence test for students.

"We're working very hard at keeping the dialogue and cooperation going," said Greydanus. "We've tried to be receptive to the parents' interests and needs."

'Fight and hustle'

When a parent disagrees with a label put on his child, his study program or the way it is being delivered, his first recourse is to meet with the child study team.

If that doesn't work, the parent can request an administrative review through the district superintendent. If they fail to reach an agreement, either side can request county mediation, state mediation and finally, a hearing before an administrative law judge. The judge's ruling can be appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

No state office records the number of problems that were settled without the filing of a formal complaint.

Of the 362 requests for due process mediation statewide in 1986-87, about 80 percent were settled before reaching a judge, said Kathy Rotter, the state special education office's coordinator for due process. The number of requests for mediation have risen by almost 100 since 1984-85, but the percentage of cases settled has remained constant.

"More people seem to be aware of their rights and are exercising them," Rotter said.

Parents say the due process system generally works well — once you pierce the bureaucracy.

"The most discouraging thing is if something goes awry, the government red tape and nylon drawers are phenomenal," said Dale Jacobson, who fought the Green Township school district last year when it tried to reduce the remedial help it was giving to his daughter, who is dyslexic.

"I got transferred to 12 different people in Trenton before I found the right person. You have to take a day off from work, sit in a smoke-filled room, take abuse. Most parents wouldn't do that.

"Once your child is classified, you become your child's lawyer. You have to fight and hustle."

Osowski admitted that due process is complex, but he said the system works and ensures that handicapped students' rights are protected.

"Yes, it is complicated. Yes, we have tried to make it as uncomplicated as possible," he said. "We can't avoid the complications. We need some system to resolve disputes that is in the best interests of the child."

"It (due process) was set up to be a very easy, friendly administrative procedure," said Sharon Walsh, of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. "What it has become in a lot of places has been much more legal than it was intended to be. It's more costly than it was intended to be."

Complicated procedures

About 30 special education cases in New Jersey — including six involving local school districts — had been referred to judges by September this year. In 1986, judges presided over 68 cases — including seven involving local districts.

Of these 100 special education court cases heard during the last two years, nearly 40 percent were decided in favor of the parents. School districts prevailed in about 30 percent,

and in the remainder the sides compromised.

Many parents, although unhappy with the education their handicapped children are receiving, choose not to fight. Some fear repercussions on their children. Others don't think they can beat the system. Most appear not to know their rights.

Child advocates say the system should be simplified so that parents are encouraged, instead of discouraged, to use it.

"Where I think the real work needs to be done by the Department of Education is really rolling up their sleeves and taking a pro-parent, pro-pupil, rather than pro-school district approach," said Hinkle, the former deputy public advocate.

"A lot of parents don't have the time, the drive, the intestinal fortitude that I have," added parent Dale Jacobson. "Then they don't get the best for their children."

'Best' or 'appropriate'? State, federal rules differ

Does New Jersey law require the state to offer special education students the "best" education? Or merely an "appropriate" one, as required by federal law?

There's still some debate, but apparently the state intends to provide a higher-quality education than required by the federal government.

That opinion stems from a 1984 U.S. District Court case involving a 12-year-old, multiply handicapped Parsippany boy. The court decided that the Parsippany school district would have to continue paying the boy's tuition to a private school in Pennsylvania because he would get a better education there than in Parsippany.

The court cited the state's administrative code, which said public schools were to provide handicapped students with special education services "according to how the pupil can best achieve success in learning."

Federal law, in contrast, requires that handicapped students receive an "appropriate" education, not the "best" one.

In the same year as the federal court issued its ruling in the Parsippany case, the state Board of Education adopted a new special education code. It copied the federal wording and required districts to give handicapped students an "appropriate" education.

Jeff Osowski, the state Department of Education's director of special education, said the change was made merely to mirror the federal law, not to reduce the state's obligation. He said it had nothing to do with the court decision.

"'Best' and 'most' are impossible to define," Osowski said. "And that was not the spirit of the law. The spirit of the law is to give (each student) what he needs."

The law does not, and should not, Osowski said, entitle parents to choose the most expensive program for their children. And he said the wording change has not decreased the quality of education handicapped students are receiving in New Jersey.

There is evidence that the federal courts do not see the wording change as diminishing the state's standard for educating the handicapped.

In 1985, a U.S. Appeals Court heard an appeal of the Parsippany case and upheld the trial court's decision. It found that the New Jersey Legislature had set a high standard when, in adopting the state's special education law, legislators wrote that "the security and welfare of the State require that all school-age children be assured the fullest possible opportunity to develop their intellectual capacities."

A year later, the appeals court affirmed that finding in a case involving the East Windsor Regional school district. It wrote that the state Department of Education gave "no intention to lower expectations for educating disabled children" when the department published the new regulations in the New Jersey Register.

David Harris, the state's deputy public advocate for the developmentally disabled, said the East Windsor decision is particularly significant because it found that "despite the change in the wording, there still is a very high state standard."

Private services are a costly alternative

Federal law entitles handicapped children to a "free, appropriate public education," but many parents pay thousands of dollars a year to get services they say are not provided by public schools.

They send their children to private consultants because they don't accept diagnoses given by public schools. They also send them to tutors and private schools because they don't want them placed in the public schools' handicapped programs.

"With the media making people aware of learning disabilities and special education, enlightened people are wanting to get a second opinion," said Dr. Harold Lubin, a West Orange psychiatrist and specialist in learning disabilities.

Private consultants, therapists and tutors say their business is growing.

"I personally have seen an increase," said Holly Blumenstyk, a learning disabilities consultant in Morristown. "People come for second opinions when they question the results or the recommendations of the child study team."

"What I see is that more people are not trusting what's going on," said Tom Bonicka, a New Milford learning disabilities specialist. "There's the question of whether the students should have been referred. Or they are referred, but the child study team is not providing services within the mandated time limit."

The cost of an outside learning or psychological evaluation in northwest New Jersey ranges from about $150 up to $400.

Most private consultants advise parents not to classify children as handicapped or have them placed in special education if their problems are only borderline.

They say parents should get help elsewhere, such as private tutoring or counseling, so their children don't feel the stigma of being put in a special class. They also warn that it is difficult to have a child removed from special education.

"Don't go for it. Let them try on their own," said Bonicka. "You can always pull him back in (to special education). You can always get tutoring."

Private educational tutoring can cost between $25 and $50 an hour. If a student needs counseling, psychiatric fees run about $100 an hour.

Some parents opt for tutoring because it is "all individualized" while special education is not. Others become so frustrated or distrustful of a public school they pull their children out entirely.

Sheila Grieff, a Scotch Plains mother of two children with learning disabilities, has spent about $8,000 a year over the last two years sending her fifth-grade son to private schools for the learning disabled.

The schools have not been approved by the state, which means the state does not ensure that they meet certain criteria, such as having a full staff of certified teachers and having classes smaller than a certain maximum.

Not every private school for the handicapped seeks state accreditation, and a non-approved school is not necessarily a bad one, said Jeff Osowski, director of special education for the state Department of Education. But putting students into a non-approved school involves a risk.

Grieff said she tried to get the district's child study team to put her son in special education classes, but they were reluctant, saying he is not truly handicapped.

"They said, 'If you really want to classify him, we will,' but their basic attitude was not going to change," she said. "We chose to spend the money and get his self-esteem back up."

She twice paid private consultants to have her son's learning problems evaluated, and they said he has a disability. That's when she put him in a private school for the learning disabled.

With her daughter now in first grade in the public system, Grieff said the family wants to move.

"I'm not happy with the district," she said. "We are looking because of the kids."

Districts say funding, staffs no match for job

Costs exceed resources

L.S. was graduated from Clifford L. Scott High School in East Orange in June 1985, but because he read at a fourth-grade level, he refused to accept his diploma.

He wanted to return to school to receive help with his learning problems.

In April 1986, Administrative Law Judge Kenneth Springer ruled that L.S. should not have been permitted to graduate. He ordered the district to pay some $15,000 to send him to the Landmark School in Massachusetts, a renowned school for dyslexics aged 13-21.

The judge found that:

- L.S. had made little progress during the nine years he spent in special education classes.
- In 1983-84, the district's child study team placed L.S. in a physics class. It agreed he would receive help from the special education teacher and that his physics teacher would let him complete assignments and tests orally. But L.S. took the same written tests as the rest of the class, received no special attention and flunked both physics and math.
- The next year, when L.S. was a senior, the district "utterly failed" to give him any remedial help in a part-time resource room as it had agreed to do. L.S. failed most of his courses.

"At this late stage in L.S.'s high school career, he requires a concentrated program in reading and writing to compensate for deficiencies in his past program. At the Landmark School, for the first time in his life, L.S. will be in the company of others like himself. He will not feel so alone and isolated," the judge wrote in his opinion.

East Orange school officials argued they did not have enough staff or resources to provide L.S. with all the services he needed. Many other districts say the same: They do not have enough money, teachers or special education counselors and therapists to give handicapped students the best education.

As a result, children are not being tested to determine whether they are handicapped within the 90-day time limit mandated by state law.

'Not appropriately served'

Students' individualized education programs—their lesson plans for the year as drawn by the child study teams and their parents—are not being implemented properly by teachers. In the most extreme cases, like that of L.S., the students are not learning.

The most severely handicapped students in rural counties, such as Sussex and Warren, have the hardest time finding the best programs. There are just too few of them to justify the cost, so they often have to settle for classes that fail to address their specific handicaps or spend more than two hours a day on a bus getting to the proper ones.

"There are probably kids who are not appropriately being served," said Richard Lecher, executive director of the Sussex County Association for Retarded Citizens. "There are no programs for the severely, multiply handicapped (in Sussex)."

Sussex is not the only county lacking programs. Among public school districts in Morris, Somerset, Sussex and Warren:

- None offers programs for the blind.
- Mountain Lakes has the only classes for the deaf.
- Morris Plains offers the only programs for the physically handicapped.
- Montville has the only classes for the socially maladjusted.

The number and quality of services a student receives "depends on which town you're in and the sophistication of the town, where you're supposed to have services across the board,"

said Dr. Joan Chase, a New Jersey psychiatry professor who sat on the commission that drafted the state's first special education laws in 1959.

"It's a complex problem," Lecher said. "The programs developed depend on the number of handicapped you have. If we had 50 deaf kids here (in Sussex County), I'm sure programs would be developed."

Shortage of therapists

Gordon Shelton of Branchville had to face this problem with his 11-year-old daughter, Bonnie, who is severely handicapped.

The appropriate program for Bonnie is a day training school, a 12-month program that stresses independent living skills. But the closest such program is the Morris County Day Training Center in Morris Township, which is about 1½ hours from the Shelton home, too long for Bonnie to spend on a bus.

Bonnie had been enrolled in the Sussex County Educational Services Commission's multiply handicapped program at Newton Memorial Hospital, but that program was unable to give her all the services she needs, Shelton said.

"She requires five days of physical and occupational therapy," said Shelton, the county's representative to the New Jersey State Parent Advisory Council for the Handicapped. "The school has not been able to provide it since September (1986). The most they can get is two days."

Janet Walsh, principal of the commission's school, said it had a physical therapist working only part time when Bonnie was enrolled because "physical therapists and occupational therapists are really in short supply."

While she noted that there's a statewide shortage of therapists, she said it's particularly acute in Sussex County because of its rural nature and because "that kind of specialist usually gravitates around major hospitals."

Shelton said he understood, and he put Bonnie on home instruction beginning last month. She does not attend school, but the district pays tutors and therapists to come to her home several hours each week. Shelton said he is satisfied that Bonnie is doing well.

"With home instruction, she'll get one-to-one help," he said. "There's nothing in the county that does that other than a mother."

Prohibitive costs

The problem of providing special education in rural areas is not easily solved. Even districts in Morris and other populated counties have trouble providing each student with complete special education services because those services are so expensive.

Northwestern New Jersey school districts that take in special education students from other districts in exchange for tuition payments charge a minimum of $4,000 for preschoolers or the neurologically impaired — when a brain or nervous system disorder hampers learning. The most expensive program is the New Jersey Regional Day School in Morris Township, which charges $14,410 for mentally retarded students.

And the costs of the residential treatment programs for the severely emotionally disturbed, autistic and multiply handicapped are almost prohibitive. Like hospital facilities, some

WHERE THE PROGRAMS ARE

The number of public school districts offering special education classes

Class type	Morris	Somerset	Sussex	Warren
Auditorily handicapped	1	0	0	0
Communication handicapped	8	5	4	2
Educable mentally retarded	5	3	2	2
Emotionally disturbed	10	8	5	4
Multiply handicapped	3	2	3	4
Neurologically impaired	20	11	8	5
Orthopedically handicapped	1	0	0	0
Perceptually impaired	29	13	19	13
Preschool handicapped	15	5	8	4
Resource room	27	15	23	24
Socially maladjusted	1	0	0	0
Trainable mentally retarded	4	1	4	3
Visually handicapped	0	0	0	0

Source: County directories of special services

charge by the day and can cost up to $100,000 a year.

Special education programs are costly because class sizes generally are smaller than conventional classes. The maximum sizes for special education classes range from eight to 15 students. Most regular classes enroll about 25 students.

School districts are reimbursed by the state an average of less than half what they spend on special education programs. The smallest reimbursement percentage anticipated by a local district this year is in Wharton, which received slightly more than one-third of the $300,000 it has budgeted for special education programs.

"We do not fund the entire cost of special education, nor are we expected to, just the excess costs," said Mel Wyns, of the state Department of Education's Division of Finance.

New Jersey is distributing about $272 million in aid to school districts for special education this year, an increase of 42 percent since 1983. That is slightly less than the 46 percent by which total state aid to education has increased during the same period — to $3.1 billion next year.

State and federal studies have questioned the wide variations in the cost of special education programs and noted with dismay the difficulty in gauging what each dollar buys. The U.S. Department of Education is currently surveying special education costs nationwide to help explain the variations.

In New Jersey, school districts receive the same amount of state aid per handicapped pupil regardless of what they spend on programs for them. This system "benefits low-spending districts and penalizes those that spend more on their students," according to a 1984 report by the state's Special Education Study Commission.

Schools share teams

Two low-spenders seem to be Dover and Fredon Township. Dover anticipated receiving $1.1 million in state aid for special education this year but has budgeted only $771,721 in special education accounts. Fredon expects to receive about $5,000 more in state aid and tuition than it plans to spend on special education programs next year.

Richard Walter, superintendent in Fredon, said the discrepancy occurred because the district is getting more state aid than it anticipated. He said the district will not gain though, because, "anything you don't spend has to be returned to the state."

School districts say the high cost of paying teachers, certified child study team members and often consulting psychiatrists or physicians are sometimes prohibitive. As a result, an assistant superintendent, school principal or other supervisor will sometimes double as director of the child study team. The team coordinator wears at least two hats in the Hanover Park Regional, Mendham, Mendham Township, Branchville and Green Township districts.

Some districts pool their resources and share child study teams — which include a learning disabilities specialist, a psychologist and a social worker. The Regional Child Study Team based in Franklin, for instance, evaluates children in Franklin, Hamburg, Hardyston and the Wallkill Valley Regional district. Branchville, High Point Regional and Frankford Township also share a team, as do Byram and Stanhope.

State law allows districts to share a team, provided the team is large enough to provide required services. But this sharing often is not sufficient to get students evaluated and placed in programs on time.

"It's not the best situation," said Peter Pallis, coordinator and social worker of the Regional Child Study Team. "Under the circumstances, it's at least appropriate."

A total of 353 students were enrolled in special education programs in 1985-86 in the school disricts for which the Franklin-based team was responsible. Pallis said all team members — some of whom are part-timers — spent at least one day a week in each district.

But K.D., a Hamburg mother, said the team does not have the staff to do its job adequately. She said it took the team about six months to evaluate and classify her sixth-grade daughter — double the time by which state law says an evaluation must be completed.

Because the girl did not get the help she needed for such a long time, K.D. said, her daughter "really learned to hate" school and was failing several subjects. When the team evaluated the girl, it determined she had learning difficulties and placed her in a resource room where she would receive some instruction part-time for the rest of the year.

"In geography she got all A's, up from F's before," her mother said.

Pallis would say only that the team "finished the evaluation at a time that was appropriate to her needs. We attempted to meet her needs throughout."

Staffing needs

In its annual report to the U.S. Department of Education, New Jersey education officials said they needed 406 additional special education teachers and 393 other special education staffers — for example, school psychologists,

therapists and teacher aids — to fully staff handicapped programs in 1984-85. Nationally, 22,852 teachers and 8,144 other staffers were needed that year.

New Jersey schools employed 11,443 special education teachers and 13,088 other staff in 1984-85.

At less than full staffing, school officials say they do the best they can, which sometimes means missing the deadline for evaluating and placing students.

"Because some schools have part-time teams, those mandated timelines are unrealistic" Pallis said. "If I was in Hamburg every day, there's no question I would be able to evaluate every kid within the timelines."

Pallis said he recently added more part-time staffers and he probably will have two full-time teams "maybe as soon as 1988," because the demand has been increasing.

The Sussex-Wantage Regional district was so short-staffed that until last year its superintendent also directed its child study team.

"They were so short-handed," said Margaret Greydanus, the team's new coordinator, who also serves as the district's coordinator of curriculum and basic skills.

"There's no way that the superintendent could do that. Even I don't feel I can do it justice."

Earlier this year some Wantage parents told the district's board of education that their children were not getting the best. One of the parents, Joanne Clint of Wantage, has two sons with learning disabilities, and she wasn't happy with the results either child achieved.

One son, she said, "had no schedule, no science or social studies. He only made progress for one year in the three years he was in class. The child study team told me, 'You should be happy.' If he was mentally retarded, maybe. But he's not."

Greydanus refused to comment on a specific case, but she defended the district's staff and administration as people who care for children and are working hard for them.

Start child's schooling early

Research has shown that the best way to help a handicapped child succeed is to start his schooling early.

Recognizing this, the state and the federal governments have been placing increased emphasis on special education programs for children from birth through age 5. But while the number of preschool handicapped and early intervention programs have been increasing, parents and experts in special education say the quality of instruction and therapy given there has not.

The greatest criticism is that the programs are too generalized and do not meet each student's special learning needs.

Herb Hinkle, a Trenton lawyer for the learning disabled and former director of the Division of Advocacy for the Developmentally Disabled of the state Department of the Public Advocate, called preschool handicapped programs "a hodgepodge of kids with disabilities."

"They've tended to generalize a lot," agreed Dr. Joan Chase, a college psychiatry professor who was a member of the panel that drafted the state's first special education laws in 1959.

Officials in the early childhood programs, however, maintain that their services are structured appropriately for young children and say they do their best to help every student individually.

In fact, the U.S. Department of Education has commended New Jersey's early childhood education programs as being models.

"We're at the stage now where we're providing good, solid, appropriate programs," said Jeff Osowski, director of the state Department of Education's office of special education. "That doesn't rule out that parents want more, and we're looking at how to do that."

Early intervention programs, which serve handicapped children from birth through age 3, are operated across the state by 40 agencies with $11.7 million in state funding. They serve 3,000 children at no cost to their parents.

The purpose of these programs is to train parents how to foster a child's normal development and to give the children one-on-one instruction. Each child must receive a minimum of two hours of individual help per week at home or at the center. The programs also must train parents how to help their children's development.

Some parents said they don't think this is enough to make a difference.

Bobbie Carlson of Independence said the Warren County early intervention program, in which her daughter Robin was enrolled, didn't help her much. She said she had to spend thousands of dollars sending the girl, who is mentally retarded and seriously ill, to private early intervention programs and physical therpists. If

she hadn't, Carlson believes, "Robin probably wouldn't be walking."

But program officials said that the age and maturity level of infants make it difficult to give them much more than a few hours of help a week.

"You can't take a 6-month-old and put him in a session five mornings a week," said Janet Walsh, principal of the Sussex County Educational Services Commission's school for infants and the severely handicapped. "The idea of early intervention is to increase the ability of parents to deal with the problems."

When a child turns 3, he becomes the responsibility of the school district. Public schools must provide preschoolers with at least 10 hours a week of instruction, whether in the school district or by sending them to another school.

The students are not given the handicapping labels that are used for students aged 5-21. Instead, students with varying degrees of handicaps are placed in classes together.

Some parents say that as a result of this grouping, their children did not receive the individualized services they deserved.

"There was not enough classroom help," said Charlotte Wharton, who doesn't think her son made enough progress in his 1½ years at the Blairstown preschool handicapped program. "He did make progress, but he did not go far enough in speech. He was very delayed in fine and gross motor skills. He was in a class with children who were more involved.

"By early October of the second year, I was very dissatisfied. He was not speaking. They agreed with me, and we went on a search and find mission."

Eleanore Shaffer, coordinator of Blairstown's child study team, said some parents expect more than the program can deliver.

"We're not going to be able to please everyone, but we do the best we can," she said.

Osowski said existing preschool programs, which last a half-day, are "entirely appropriate." He said most such programs group students according to their abilities because it is virtually impossible to diagnose correctly specific handicaps when children are so young.

"At a very early age, you don't want to be typecasting children with stigmatizing labels," he said. "Errors are made at that early age."

Life a series of battles for Robin Ann Carlson

Robin Ann Carlson was born Nov. 25, 1983, with Down's syndrome — a chromosomal abnormality that causes mental retardation — and a weak heart.

She spent the first month of her life in a neonatal intensive care unit, and at 2 months had closed-heart surgery and a tracheotomy.

During the next 3½ years, she underwent open-heart surgery, several failed surgical attempts to remove the tube in her throat through which she breathes, the first of at least three operations to reconstruct her trachea, and countless hours of therapy. Her medical and therapy bills total more than $870,000, most of which has been paid by insurance.

At surgery, Robin was just 2 months old, weighed 4 pounds, 9 ounces, was malnourished and on a respirator. And going ahead with surgery was one of the most difficult decisions Bob and Bobbie Carlson, who live in Independence, have ever made.

"For the next 18 months, we had nurses 12 hours a day, and I watched her after that," her mother said. "At least 10 times a day she needed CPR. Her bedroom is an intensive care unit. It's not your normal kind of 3-year-old existence."

While they were caring for their critically ill infant, the Carlsons saw a sudden change in what had been the normal development of their 18-month-old middle daughter, Kristin. Now almost 5, Kristin watched her baby sister go into cardiac arrest and had an emotional reaction that made her stop talking and caused her to walk with a limp, her mother said.

Bobbie enrolled both daughters in a Warren County special education program for children up to 3 years old. But she wasn't happy with it or with the services her children received at two other preschool programs, so she supplemented their free schooling with private programs.

She enrolled Robin in a Morristown Memorial Hospital private early intervention program, and the child "just sailed." Program officials "gave us our best background of what we could do, what was available. They gave us contacts, ways to work with her."

The child study team in Independence then recommended that Robin be enrolled in the New Jersey Regional Day School in Morristown, which serves the mentally retarded and physically handicapped. Carlson said Robin has been there since the first of the year, and she likes it.

Robin Ann Carlson, seated in her mother's lap, was born with Down's Syndrome. At age 3, she's had countless hours of therapy, but, says her mother, Bobbie, 'I'm very excited about Robin.' From left, Joy, 6, Bob Carlson, Bobbie and Robin, and Kristin, 4, all of Independence.

"She's never treated like she's handicapped in that school."

Meanwhile, about a year ago, Carlson took Kristin to a therapist in Teaneck, who immediately diagnosed her problem: Kristin's adenoids were pushing on her sinuses, which affected her hearing, which in turn affected her speech. Kristin has been in speech therapy for six months at a cost of $100 a week, and recently her adenoids were removed.

"The change in this child is phenomenal," her mother said. Kristin now speaks normally.

The family was able to afford all these extras mostly because Robin is covered by a $1 million health insurance policy through her father's employer, M&M/Mars in Hackettstown. But that coverage is about to run out.

"She'll reach that before she's 4," Bobbie Carlson said.

The family's toughest battle was finding the best programs for their daughters, especially in a relatively rural county such as Warren. At 28, already the mother of two normal children, Bobbie Carlson knew little about Down's syndrome when Robin was born. She also didn't know where to get help.

"You can get real frustrated with Down's syndrome," Carlson said. "My whole life revolves around Robin's schedule. She is never going to be like her sisters."

"But I have a 3½-year-old, and she's a real bright kid. She runs, she climbs. I'm very excited about Robin."

Life is looking brighter for Kristin, who graduated from the preschool handicapped program and attends regular kindergarten classes in Independence. She enjoys modeling with her 6-year-old sister, Joy.

But Robin is facing at least two more operations in an Ohio hospital to have her throat reconstructed. During the first operation last month, doctors inserted a metal tube into her throat, which the girl is finding "very painful," Bobbie Carlson said.

"She's just gotten back to her normal, fun-loving self again, and next month when she has to go back everything is going to be sore again," Carlson added.

Money has become a concern, too. Carlson said that if the family cannot get a waiver on Robin's insurance cap, "Bob may have to quit his job to find one where he can get more insurance."

Despite these problems, Carlson said that what matters most is that "We have three children who are extremely happy." The pleasures brought by Robin's smiles and successes outweigh the hardships, she said.

"We thank God every day for giving us Robin."

COST OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

What districts anticipate receiving in state aid and tuition vs. what they expect to spend in 1987-88

District	Income	Expenditures	Difference
Andover Reg.	$202,061	$340,000	– $137,939
Boonton	$352,257	$1,046,275	– $694,018
Dover	$1,142,442	$771,721	+ $370,721
Fredon Twp.	$158,160	$152,950	+ $5,210
Green Twp.	$112,751	$160,499	– $47,747
Hanover Park	$404,274	$625,800	– $221,526
Kittatinny Reg.	$249,106	$375,683	– $126,577
Morris District	$1,174,418	$2,949,555	– $1,775,137
Parsippany	$1,472,552	$3,484,986	– $2,012,434
Rockaway	$150,461	$252,833	– $102,372
Washington Twp.	$485,911	$1,234,221	– $748,310
Wharton	$103,842	$300,566	– $196,724

Source: 1987-88 school district budgets

Search for better way to teach handicapped

New plan won't fix everything

In 1979, just a year after the federal laws governing special education took effect, New Jersey was looking for a better way.

Eight years later, the state is preparing to test its "Plan to Revise Special Education" in 13 school districts, including Washington Township, Morris County, and Bernardsville, to determine if it has found that way.

State officials say the plan, which if adopted by the state Board of Education would affect all districts beginning in 1990, would address many of the problems existing in special education. It would:

- Establish an extra step in evaluating students with mild learning problems and require school districts to set up alternatives for helping them in regular classes. This could reduce the number of students who are needlessly placed in special education classes.
- Require that students meet specific criteria regarding their learning problems before they could be placed in handicapped classes. This could reduce the number of students placed in inappropriate classes.
- Expand part-time programs so fewer students spend most of their days in full-time special education classes. This could raise the self-esteem of handicapped students because they would spend more time with non-handicapped peers.
- Alter the funding system by which the state reimburses school districts for part of their special education expenses and eliminate incentives for placing students into the highest-paying categories of handicaps. The new system would reimburse schools for a portion of their actual expenditures instead of giving them varying amounts for each student classified as handicapped.
- Replace a generic teacher of the handicapped certificate with special training for teachers of the mildly and moderately handicapped and for teachers of the severely han-

dicapped. This should improve the quality of instruction.

However, experts in the field of special education and parents say the plan will not address other critical deficiencies.

It will not bring the most specialized programs to the state's rural areas, where none of these programs exist now. It will not increase parental education or involvement. And it gives the public no way to measure the success of special education programs.

Experts also question whether the plan will achieve one of its most important goals: Removing the stigma surrounding special education by removing the handicapping labels placed on students that make them feel "retarded."

"The whole revision I don't think will amount to a hill of beans of difference," said Dr. Marvin Chartoff, a private psychologist from Chester who works as a consultant to Washington Township's schools.

No labels for Johnny

The impetus for New Jersey's reform was a 1979 bill that would have changed the way special education is funded. Instead of passing that bill, however, the Legislature requested a study of all special education programs.

A group of experts, headed by Albert Burstein, a Hackensack lawyer who formerly chaired the Assembly Education Committee, studied the system from 1982 through 1984. It issued its recommendations in 1985, and they served as the basis for the state's "Plan to Revise Special Education."

One major aspect of the plan, designed to weed out students needlessly placed in special education, will add an extra step to the classification process.

Under the current system, a child named Johnny believed to have mild learning or behavioral problems is evaluated by his school district's child study team. If the team finds learning problems, it puts him in a class for the perceptually impaired or into a part-time resource room where he receives help in the subjects he finds toughest. If it finds emotional problems, it puts him in a class for the emotionally disturbed.

"We believe we will see a decrease in numbers (of students classified as handicapped), but the real result is kids will be served more appropriately in regular education," said Jeff Osowski, director of special education with the state Department of Education.

The committee could recommend placing students with learning problems in remedial courses, having them work with student tutors, or having their teachers alter their instruction. For example, if Johnny learns better through sight, his teacher could use more visual aids.

For a student with behavioral problems, the committee could recommend flexible class hours and volunteer or paid work; identify an area where he could let off steam when angry or frustrated; or develop a contract that spells out how he should behave and reward good behavior.

The committee would determine within six to eight weeks whether its recommendations are effective. If not, it could refer Johnny to the child study team.

The plan also will give school officials more options for keeping students out of full-day handicapped classes.

Presently, after Johnny is found to be handicapped, he is placed into one of 15 categories and given an individualized education plan outlining what he should learn and how he should be taught. He can be placed in a resource room for two hours a day, where he learns the subjects he is having the most trouble with, or into a full-day program, where he would rarely get to see his non-handicapped peers. There is no in-between.

Under the new plan, Johnny would still be considered a special education student, but he would not be labeled. He would be deemed eligible for part-time help, a full-day class for the handicapped or related services. The latter category would include mostly students receiving speech therapy.

Then Johnny could spend up to a half-day in the resource center and still get to see his non-handicapped friends for a good portion of the day.

Another option under the new plan would be to send a special education teacher into Johnny's regular classroom to give him extra help. While Johnny's regular classroom teacher drills the class on multiplication tables, for instance, his special education teacher could sit in the back of the room with him and use balls to show him what 3-times-3 means.

The plan's major change in full-time programs would be in grouping perceptually impaired and neurologically impaired students together in a class for the learning disabled. Presently, perceptually impaired students and neurologically impaired students learn in separate classes. The federal government's rules consider both these groups under the category learning disabled.

The names of the classes in which other handicapped students are placed would differ from what they are called today, but the type of instruction given would remain the same. However, school districts would no longer be able to put a name on a student's problem and

simply put him in a class bearing that name. They would have to group children by need instead.

"The primary problem is that the system today focuses on naming the child's disability," said Osowski. For example, two neurologically impaired children should not be in the same class if "one has a serious language deficiency (and) the other has poor motor controls."

Revamped funding

A new system for funding special education, based on similar funding systems used in states such as Massachusetts, South Dakota and California, would remove the existing incentive for districts to place students in special education classes.

The current system requires Johnny to be placed in a special education class for his school district to receive state money to help him. Because some categories of handicaps bring more money than others, school officials have an incentive to classify students in the more severe categories, which bring the greatest aid.

The proposed system would eliminate that incentive because the school district would be reimbursed for part of whatever it spends on educating Johnny, regardless of the kind of class he's in.

"We would fund a significant portion of teacher salaries, aides, child study teams, materials and equipment," Osowski said. "The rest — the heat, the room, the lights, clerical help — the district would pick up."

Reimbursing districts based on what they spend also would be more fair, officials say, because districts running the most costly programs would get the same percentage reimbursed as those with less expensive programs.

Osowski said he does not think the new funding system will cost taxpayers additional money. He said it merely will put existing state aid to better use.

Finally, the state is proposing that teachers of the handicapped receive more specific training. A teacher would receive a certificate for teaching students with either mild and moderate handicaps, or with severe and profound handicaps.

Currently there is only one certificate for teachers of special education.

"The teacher of the severely handicapped would learn how to teach students to feed themselves," said Osowski. "The teacher of the mild and moderately handicapped would learn how to teach reading and math."

Both the changes in teacher certification and in funding will depend on how well the new plan works in the pilot districts when the test begins next year.

School officials generally favor the plan, saying anything to remove the stigma of being placed in special education would be an improvement.

"To put a name or a label on a child is a dreadful thing to do," said Patricia Van Engelen, coordinator of Ogdensburg's child study team. "If there's any way to take that away, it's got to be better for the child."

Excitement over plan

Officials in Bernardsville and Washington Township are excited at being able to pilot the plan. They are confident it will work, and say they already follow many of its points.

"We don't 'evaluate' anyone," said Walter Mahler, coordinator of Bernardsville's child study team. "We describe the child's needs, describe the child's strengths. This is the way we've been going for the last 10 or 12 years."

"We have special education teachers who go into the regular classrooms and team teach," said Vickie Kelber, director of student personnel services in Washington Township.

Madeleine Will, an assistant U.S. education secretary, endorsed many of the provisions of New Jersey's plan in a 1986 report on special education. But other experts differ with some parts of the plan and are not convinced other parts will work.

Many learning disabilities specialists, for instance, say that lumping the perceptually impaired with the neurologically impaired in a class for the learning disabled could be disastrous unless the instruction is truly individualized. They say that the perceptually impaired work on a higher level and feel held back and frustrated when placed in classes with students who have brain or physiological impairments and a lower IQ.

"They need a completely different training," said Dr. Harold Lubin, a West Orange psychiatrist and nationally recognized learning disabilities specialist. "The other kids have difficulty talking or moving."

George Mako said the plan would hurt the Morris County Education Center in Mount Tabor, where he was recently principal, because it would "be more difficult for districts to classify students as emotionally disturbed." He said the center groups students "by behavioral chemistry first. Our approach is management first, then teach."

Jim Button of the U.S. Department of Education's policy and planning division said the proposed funding system could be difficult

to administer, too. He said a system that funds the costs of special education rather than the students in it is "difficult from a practical position. At some point in time they have to be categorized" to get federal aid.

Some local school officials, such as Neil Ellman, coordinator of the Hanover Park Regional child study team, say the plan is "too amorphous."

"I'd rather see the current law cleaned up," Ellman said. For instance, he said school districts should be given more than 90 days after a referral to evaluate and place a student in a special education program. He said the 90-day limit is "often impossible" to meet.

Shortcomings

There are other problems that the plan does not — and state officials say cannot — address:

- It will not bring programs to blind or severely retarded children in rural areas. Those children must continue traveling long distances to more populated areas.

  "When you take a child with unique needs in an area where there's no child like him, we're not going to be able to eliminate those problems," Osowski said. "We get a lot of complaints about that. It's difficult for a district to provide for a single child."

- It establishes no concrete ways to measure the quality of programs, nor does it try to get more students de-classified and returned to regular education classes. Presently no more than 2 percent of all New Jersey's handicapped students are de-classified annually.

  Osowski said it is virtually impossible to find an objective way of measuring such an individualized education system because current measures of success — such as basic skills tests — do not account for learning differences.

  He also said it is unfair to gauge special education by how many students are returned to regular education programs. Most handicapped students never get over their learning problems and need continued help, Osowski said.

  "Some people consider special education to be like a medicine that cures," he said. "That's not really the right way to look at it."

- The plan does not require any improved parental education or involvement in programs.

  "Where I really think the work needs to be done by the Department of Education is really rolling up their sleeves and taking a pro-parent, pro-pupil, rather than pro-school district approach," said Herb Hinkle, a Trenton attorney and former director of the State Public Advocate's Division of Advocacy for the Developmentally Disabled.

  Osowski denied that the department takes sides in special education disputes. He said the department's first concern is that the children get the education they need.

Finally, several experts said they are not convinced that removing labels will remove the stigma attached to special education.

"When you create a new term, it's not too long before the stigma comes back," said Richard Lecher, executive director of the Sussex County Association for Retarded Citizens. "It may just be a bureaucratic nightmare."

Handicapped find self-esteem at job center

Allen Phillips and Ted Wright, both 23, are practically inseparable.

Former buddies at High Point Regional High School, they spent their lives in special education programs for the mentally retarded, who comprise about 5 percent of New Jersey's handicapped students. They play basketball and football together. And they hope to get jobs at McDonald's together.

Now they're back in class together at another school, of sorts — the Fredon Adult Training Center for the mentally retarded. They work with 43 other adults at the center, run in a warehouse by the Sussex County Association for Retarded Citizens, learning jobs and social skills.

In one large, windowed room of the warehouse, workers fill one-pound boxes of nails. On one side workers fill boxes almost to the top. On the other side a group of the more highly functioning people weigh the boxes to bring them closer to a pound. A third group, using sophisticated scales, check the weight a third time. Other workers seal the boxes, pack them in crates, and tape and stack them.

In another room, a group of people stick computer-printed labels on pieces of cardboard, which someone else folds into the boxes.

Each time a worker completes a task he gets a blue chip. The chips are added at the end of the week, and this serves as the basis for the worker's pay.

Other adults work on landscaping and lawn crews and clean churches and private homes, according to Michael Doman-Clayton, director of adult training centers with the Association for Retarded Citizens.

In most cases, the training builds on what the adults learned in school. But in other cases it's a retarded person's first exposure to work.

"Not everyone who comes here comes from a high school," Doman-Clayton said. "We have people who come from institutions. We just got a guy who's been living with his parents for 40 years. Somehow he fell through the cracks."

The adults at the center range in age from 21 to their mid-50s, said Doman-Clayton.

Through a program called Project Hire, the state Association for Retarded Citizens interviews the best workers and tries to place them in outside jobs. One man in his 50s recently started working at a McDonald's.

"They have to show they know how to work with others, how to complement each other at work. They have to know when to get up. They also have to be able to go with the flow," Doman-Clayton said.

Positive attitudes are also stressed at the center.

"They realize they can't sing in the choir," said Kevin Guyette, who works with the Sussex association. "But they think of what their abilities are, rather than their limitations. Self-esteem is a big thing around here, and lots of it."

Phillips and Wright smile alot and have no loss of pride. They seem on their way to rich, independent lives.

"I got a girlfriend," Phillips brags when asked about himself. He's proud to say he bowls and lifts weights, which is not surprising based on the size of his chest.

Wright, who lives in Newton, has a girlfriend, too, and takes her "to Pizza Hut." He likes to play kickball, badminton and baseball.

Phillips, who lives in Sussex, says he "liked school." Math was his favorite subject because "it was real easy for me."

The two spent most of their time in school together but said they didn't cause any trouble.

"We're good guys," Wright said.

Ted Wright and Allen Phillips: 'We're good guys.' The pair were inseparable as students in special education, and now work at the Fredon Adult Training Center, learning jobs and social skills.

Gauging the effectiveness of handicapped programs

Success is hard to measure

It's difficult to objectively judge New Jersey's special education system — and whether taxpayers are getting their money's worth.

One reason is because there is so little data to examine. Few handicapped students have to take basic skills tests. The results of those who do are disappointing.

Another is that although both the federal and state governments review special education programs, neither does much to determine whether the programs are effective.

Two other possible measures of the system's success — the percentage of students who are declassified out of special education and the number who drop out of school — are not encouraging. But it might not be fair to evaluate a system based on such few statistics.

Gauging how successful special education has been in helping students overcome their handicaps is important because taxpayers are spending huge amounts of money on a relatively small group of students.

In 1982-83, some $12 billion in state, federal and local taxes were spent on special education across the nation — for an average $2,750 per student. About $552 million was spent on special education in New Jersey. About 11 percent of students nationwide and 15 percent of New Jersey students receive special education services.

Jeff Osowski, director of the state's Division of Special Education, said there's a national movement to try to find ways of gauging special education programs. But he said the special education system is just too individualized and complex.

"We don't have any mechanism for identifying the quality of programs," said Osowski. He also said there can be no general measure of achievement for handicapped students because they have varying degrees of ability and "we want them to achieve within the context of their individual abilities."

The state Department of Education took one step toward gauging quality earlier this year when it toughened the graduation requirements handicapped students must meet.

Previously, districts could exempt all handicapped students from passing the High School Proficiency Test and other course requirements needed for graduation.

Under the new regulations, mildly handicapped students — about 60 percent of all those classified — would have to pass the HSPT. Another 25 percent — including the emotionally disturbed and neurologically impaired — would have to demonstrate verbally or in some other way the same level of proficiency in the skills tested.

The most severely handicapped would have to meet alternate goals set by the child study team before receiving a diploma.

"We want to set high and fair standards for handicapped students," said Osowski. "We want to ensure that special ed is not used as a back door for giving a diploma."

Half of the state's 9,054 freshmen enrolled in special education classes last year took the High School Proficiency Test. Less than 19 percent of them passed it. Of the 10th grade special education students who took the test a second time last spring, about 25 percent passed.

The state Department of Education does not extract the test scores of handicapped students in the two other grades it charts — third and sixth.

Measures of success

Since one goal of special education is to get as many students as possible back into regular classes, one way to grade the system is by looking at the number of students who graduate out of special education each year.

The rate at which New Jersey districts declassify students is very low.

In 1985-86, child study teams declassified only 2,200 children, or 1.3 percent of all special ed students, according to the state Department

of Education. The fact that so few students are moved out of special education is one of the greatest complaints parents have with the system.

"They lead you to believe eventually the child will be mainstreamed," said Joanne Clint, a Wantage mother of two learning-disabled sons. "Then you see that never happens."

But the percentage of students who are declassified is not a fair measure of success, according to Jim Button of the U.S. Department of Education's special education policy and planning division.

"It's very difficult to get out of the special ed system," Button said. "The theory is that many of the handicapping conditions are lifelong. Fundamentally, there is no reason why a wide variety of these kids should ever really get out of special ed."

"We have our success stories," said Margaret Greydanus, coordinator of the child study team in the Sussex-Wantage Regional District. "But that's the exception. It's not the goal for every child."

One indication that special education is not helping handicapped high school students as much as it should is the high dropout rate. In 1984-85, 21 percent of New Jersey's handicapped students aged 16 and older dropped out of school. In comparison, 5 percent of all high school students in New Jersey dropped out that year.

Nevertheless, New Jersey's special education graduation rate is better than the national average. In 1984-85, about 73 percent of its handicapped high schoolers were graduated compared to just 55 percent nationally. The state is currently funding nine pilot projects — including one in the Morris Hills Regional District — to find new ways of helping special education students graduate and get jobs.

Although no New Jersey figures are available, handicapped adults nationwide have difficulty getting jobs. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights estimates that between 50 percent and 70 percent of handicapped adults are jobless.

Monitoring duties

When Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, it gave the U.S. secretary of education the responsibility to "assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate handicapped children."

Federal officials visit each state every four years to check compliance in 15 areas by studying state laws and reports and by visiting a handful of programs. But they mostly rely on the states to monitor local programs.

During 1985-86, the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services visited 11 states and found none complied fully with three aspects of the law: state monitoring of local programs, general supervision and placing students in the least restrictive environments. More than half were not complying with seven other aspects of the law.

New Jersey was monitored last year, but the results of that visit are not available yet. The previous monitoring in 1982 noted deficiencies in general supervision, students' rights to an education, state monitoring of local school districts, participation of private school students and the due process system.

Despite that, federal officials did not find that the state had failed to give students an appropriate education or to monitor districts, but instead found only that some state laws and regulations were worded improperly so they did not correspond to the federal law.

State officials spend a week monitoring district special education programs every five years, and local programs have generally received passing grades.

"We review their records to make sure the proper procedures are in place," said Moira Fenton, Morris County's education specialist for special needs. "We have to check their curriculum and facilities. We check their IEPs (individualized education programs) to make sure they are meeting their goals and objectives."

However, the monitoring process is not sophisticated enough to permit county and state officials to easily find abuses of the law. As a result, the state must rely on parents or other outsiders to file complaints about programs.

Investigating complaints

State officials do investigate complaints lodged by parents. Last year Osowski's department investigated about 30 complaints and found violations of state law in two-thirds of them. When state officials find problems, they order school districts to correct them and check to ensure that the deficiencies are remedied.

However, neither Osowski nor several of the county education specialists said they would share information about what districts they've investigated with parents because they ensure that whatever problems they find they will correct.

"I think (the state) ought to do more policing of what goes on in the districts," said Herb Hinkle, a Trenton attorney who represents the handicapped.

David Harris, the state's deputy public advocate in the Division of the Developmentally Disabled, said his office has heard complaints about too many students being placed in special education. But he said the office has not investigated that possibility as a system-wide problem.

"We deal with it when it comes up on an individual basis," he said.

Some problems, such as school districts taking longer than the 90 days provided by state law to evaluate and classify students, seem widespread but often are not discovered unless parents complain.

"The vast majority of the time we are able to stay within the guidelines" for classifying a student within 90 days, said Greydanus, of the Sussex-Wantage district. "When we don't, the state department is not penalizing us as long as they know we're trying."

Osowski denied that the state permits such violations. He says it immediately orders them to be rectified.

"I go in and fix it," he said.

Favorable reviews

Without being able to look at statistics, the dozens of parents, district officials and outside experts interviewed for this series gave the state's special education system mixed, though generally favorable, reviews.

"More often than not, a lot of districts try to do what is basically appropriate," said Tom Bonicka, a private learning disabilities consultant from West Milford. "Overall, the programs are pretty progressive."

"The Department of Education at varying levels needs to cut class sizes, upgrade programming," said Dr. Matthew Schiff, a Long Branch psychiatrist.

"I don't think the public schools are achieving the success of private schools," said Lois Rothschild, a Randolph-based educational consultant. "They are not making the right progress."

State and federal officials said the only way to judge whether the system is working is to ask a lot of questions.

Button said every parent should get involved in developing his child's individualized education program and then follow closely his child's progress to determine whether the child is reaching the goals set by the plan.

Osowski suggested that parents should question school officials and visit some classes. Among the questions he said they should ask, for instance, were:

- Tell me what handicapped programs you offer.
- What are the curricula you use? Are they written and specific?
- What's the staff turnover rate?
- Are all classes filled to the maximum permitted class sizes?
- Do students receive a full day of instruction?
- What's the high school graduation rate and what percentage of those who graduate get jobs?

"It's hard to get a hold on the quality of a district's programs," Osowski said. "Parents can get a handle on that if they go in and ask questions."

Parents should get involved to help child

The best way for parents to ensure that a handicapped child gets the best education possible is to get involved.

Parents who suspect a child may have learning disabilities, or who are told the child has been referred to a child study team for educational testing, should learn as much as possible about the state and federal laws governing special education.

They should play an active role in determining whether to place the child in special education programs and the kind of instruction the child will receive.

Herb Hinkle, a Trenton attorney who represents the handicapped, says parental involvement is vital: "It's clear to me the parents who are informed of their rights and stand up for them are the ones who get the services."

School districts and parent groups often reach out to parents of newly-referred students and try to explain the state's special education system to them. If this doesn't happen, or if parents feel they don't get enough help from the district, they can find assistance from a number of sources:

- **County education offices**. Each county has a person employed by the state Department of Education who is responsible for overseeing special education programs. These specialists can answer questions and provide parents with handbooks describing special

education programs within the counties.

In Morris County, contact Moira Fenton at 829-8571.

In Somerset County, contact Katie LaMar Gibson at 231-7171.

In Sussex and Warren counties, contact Elaine Walker at 383-2521 or 475-5361.

- The Department of Education, 609-292-0147.
- **Child Find** at 800-322-8174. Parents can call Child Find when they suspect their children are handicapped but are not receiving services.
- **The state's learning resource centers**. They can give parents information and put them in touch with any of the 400 parent groups in New Jersey. The groups focus on a range of problems, from children with mild learning disabilities to the most severely retarded.

Parents in Morris, Sussex and Warren counties should call 539-0331.

Somerset County parents should call 390-6038.

- The state Department of the Public Advocate, 609-292-9742. It can give parents advice on legal questions.

Additionally, parents should make sure they read the state's special education regulations, which they can get from their local school districts. They also should try to obtain the Handbook for Parents published by the state. This booklet, written in plain English, can help parents translate the complicated regulations.

Finally, the library can be a great source of information. Parents can find books that discuss specific handicaps — such as mental retardation — and what they can do at home to help students compensate for their handicaps. Several books also have been written about famous handicapped people and the new special education laws.

Learning-disabled needn't rule out college

High schools could push harder

When Scott Emory of Mendham receives his bachelor's degree from American International University in Massachusetts next June, he'll be feeling prouder than most other graduates.

The 24-year-old Emory, who has a learning disability and was told by many high school teachers that he wouldn't make it in college, said he is savoring the thought of proving those teachers wrong.

"I was told just about every day for four years in high school: 'You're just not cut out for college. You should go to vocational school,'" said Emory, who expects to receive after five years of study a bachelor's degree in liberal arts with minors in biology and psychology. "I feel better about myself now, but deep down inside, emotionally, it hurts."

Experts in the field of educating handicapped students say the predominant attitude at high schools remains that special education students should take vocational training.

"Many special education students going through high school programs are not truly in college prep courses," said Jacqueline Kress, assistant director of special academic programs with the state Department of Higher Education. "They have never been exposed to lab courses, never had a language, never had geometry. Then they don't qualify for a regular four-year college." But Kress and others say this attitude is starting to change, and more handicapped students than ever are attending college.

"Counseling services are improving as more information is becoming available," said Dr. Mary Farrell, director of Fairleigh Dickinson University's learning disabilities program. "I doubt we're doing the best job we can."

Several Morris County parents are concerned that their high school-aged children are not receiving the help they will need to make it in college.

The parents of one teenager said their child did "fairly well" in college preparatory courses last year, but the child study team in their school district this year put the teen back into special education courses. This student, who had studied algebra last year, is being taught multiplication and division this year.

Parents of two other children said their learning-disabled sons are not getting enough help.

The boys had performed well in college pre-

paratory courses last year because they received tutorial help in a study skills course. This year, however, they said the course has been revised, so that students learn how to organize information but no longer receive tutoring in subjects.

"Up to this point, we were happy," said one mother, who asked not to be identified. "My son's needs are not being met. They've taken that tutorial away."

Jeff Osowski, the state Department of Education's director of special education, said he has received very few complaints that high schools were not preparing their handicapped children for college work. He added that not all handicapped students have the abilities to succeed in college.

Osowski said good secondary special education programs for the mildly handicapped teach students more than the basic skills, usually by grouping them in classes according to their abilities rather than their handicapping conditions.

Walter Mahler, director of special services in Bernardsville, said Bernards High School's program works well because the students' regular subject teachers and resource room teachers, who give handicapped students extra help, work together. The cooperation does not always come easily, though.

"Some teachers say, 'If he's going to be in my class, he's going to be treated like everyone else,'" Mahler said. "Where we have turned the corner is getting the classroom teachers to see it as a benefit. They don't see the students in their classes frustrated and acting that out. Reaction at our high school has been very favorable."

He said the district also requires that almost every mildly handicapped child try to pass the High School Proficiency Test for two years before determining whether the student should be exempted from taking the test as a graduation requirement.

"If the state is saying this is a basic test, we want to get as many students as possible to pass it," he said. "I'd get repercussions from parents if we did not require them to take it because they want to see that their children know the work."

The percentage of handicapped students passing the test statewide is not encouraging — 18.7 percent of 4,663 freshmen in special education last year passed the reading, writing and math sections of the HSPT.

Osowski said he is not too concerned about the low passing rate, but has to study it further.

Students who have graduated from special education programs say they wish they had received more help in high school.

Scott Emory, who plans to become a chiropractor, said that had it not been for his parents and his own ambition, "I could not have gotten to college."

A diabetic who was hyperactive, Emory said he was misclassified as emotionally disturbed in second grade and for three years attended the private Lincoln School, then located in Peapack, for students with emotional and neurological handicaps. He spent most of his time at the school coloring and drawing pictures.

When Emory's parents got him back into the Mendham schools, he had to repeat the fourth grade.

Emory said his mastery of the basic skills is still lacking: "Spelling is horrible for me, and I can't do math because I missed the beginnings. But I can talk on the same level as anyone else."

But the most frustrating time for Emory was high school. He said several teachers told him: "You don't need college. You shouldn't apply because you'll never get in."

Some of the teachers of his college-prep subjects went out of their way to help him after school or during free periods. But in his special education classes, Emory said he played games such as Scrabble and Monopoly.

With the help of his parents and tutors, Emory was graduated in 1983.

While the work at college has been "extremely difficult," Emory says he can manage because of the help he receives from American International's Curtis Blake Center for the learning disabled. Tutors help him master subject matter. Emory also is allowed to study by listening to taped books, and he is able to take exams untimed and orally.

An estimated 300 colleges across the country — more than ever — have developed programs to meet the needs of the handicapped. At least nine New Jersey colleges have specialized counseling and tutorial programs for the learning disabled, said Kress, of the Department of Higher Education.

She estimated that between 3,000 and 4,000 New Jersey college students have special needs. A precise number is impossible to get, however, because colleges are prohibited by law from asking students whether they are handicapped.

Kress said that because many learning disabled students have not passed all the courses required to get into college, many must first attend community colleges, which have no entrance requirements.

To improve the chances that learning disabled students will have at succeeding in college, the state Department of Higher Education has funded a dozen programs to im-

prove handicapped students' reading skills, study skills and to train faculty in ways of teaching them.

In addition, the department is sponsoring two comprehensive learning centers and clinics at community colleges in Ocean and Cumberland counties, and is expected to announce by the end of the month the establishment of a third center at a four-year college in northern New Jersey.

Fairleigh Dickinson, which won a grant to train its faculty how to work with the learning disabled, is hoping to get $200,000 to host that comprehensive program. Learning centers at FDU's campuses currently give its students some extra help. Farrell said she estimates that 400 of FDU's more than 10,000 students have learning disabilities.

And as demand has increased, even more specialized programs for the learning disabled have been cropping up around the country.

For example, Landmark College in Putney, Vt., was established three years ago not to award bachelor's degrees, but to teach college-aged adults to read and write and to succeed in a regular college.

Most of the 145 students presently enrolled are in Landmark's pre-college program, where they are taught how to read and write before they are allowed to take college-level courses.

"Most students just have not gotten the skills needed to get into our college program," said Amy Russian, a spokeswoman for Landmark. "High schools and prep schools are not focusing on skill developments."

She said that while other colleges "allow students to assimilate materials without learning to read and write, students here are required to do all the work." They cannot use tape recorders, but must read texts, and they cannot take tests orally, but they must write out answers, Russian added.

The program has been very successful, and Russian attributes that to its small classes — about six students on average — and even smaller student-teacher ratio of 3-to-1.

John and Kenny Mancuso of Morris Township both have attended Landmark. Their mother, Lois, said one took a seven-week summer program that has been invaluable in preparing him for his first year at Penn State University; the other is enrolled in the pre-college program and "could not have succeeded without that kind of support."

Lois Mancuso has been working with other parents and business leaders to get support for establishing solid college programs for the learning disabled in northwest New Jersey because, at $20,000 a year, the cost of a school like Landmark is prohibitive, she noted.

Officials say that more colleges will adapt as the need for services for the learning disabled increases. They added that in order for the college barriers to be broken, the learning disabled and their parents must be made aware that college can be an alternative and that the students must prepare for college by taking all the courses they'll need and performing well.

"We plan for non-special ed students who want to go to college from the end of eighth grade on," said Kress. "For some students outside the regular classrooms, this is not discussed."

She said parents should talk with school officials and if college is considered a "reasonable" option, the student's individualized education program should schedule the students into college-prep courses backed up by remedial help.

"I'm sure in the past, kids who should've gone to college were discouraged from doing so," said Farrell, "but I really think that's changing."

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